



Rang De Basanti- Consumption,Citizenship and the Public Sphere

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RANG DE BASANTI - CONSUMPTION, CITIZENSHIP AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

A Thesis Presented

by

MEGHANA DILIP

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Communication

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

They have the power of description and we succumb to the pictures they construct.

Salman Rushdie, *Satanic Verses*

From makeshift screens to multiplexes and from black and white classics to multi-starrer extravaganzas, you can either love movies or hate them, but simply cannot afford to ignore them. To most Indians, cinema is an important part of their lives. It is not a distant two to three hour distraction, but a vicarious lifestyle. Cinema with its universal appeal provides to most Indians an alternative to escape the monotony of their daily lives. The actors therefore turn into cult figures, the hero is applauded, the virtuous are worshipped and the villain is condemned. There is no escape from the omnipresence of cinema in India today as everybody from the roadside vendor to the politician is drawn towards the larger than life presence of the big screen personalities, and the magic of the medium that showcases it to them.

Indians love their cinema which is why India is the world's largest producer of films. India boasts of a thriving film industry that produces more than 1000 feature films annually in almost all Indian languages and these are seen in over 13,000 cinema halls in the country. "Every three months an audience as large as India's entire population flocks to the cinema halls."¹ Films in India are decentralized and are therefore shot in

¹The Central Board of Film Certification, (CBFC) a government of India enterprise.

various locations in the country. Bollywood or Hindi-language productions made in Mumbai, and Tamil and Telugu films made in Chennai and Hyderabad form the bulk of Indian film productions. The audience for mainstream Indian films is comprised not only of Indians in their home country but also diasporic viewers in large parts of the Middle-East and South-East Asia, the UK, US and Europe.² In 2003, Indian films reached around 3.4 billion viewers in all parts of the world.³ Additionally, the onset of satellite television in India during the early 90s also aided the popularization of Indian cinema. This is because Indian television satisfied the demand for films as well as film based programming. Moreover, “Television offered the film industry not just additional viewership but also an additional revenue stream”⁴ and this made it profitable for television channels to support the Indian film industry. Today in 2007, there are more than 30 television channels that telecast Indian movies as a part of their daily programming content. Indian films are also screened weekly during prime-time on all popular channels, including the national broadcaster, Doordarshan. What all this has resulted in is a country of cinema lovers who love their films and worship their stars, sometimes literally.⁵

According to the national readership survey in India for 2006, 39 million Indians go to the movies (at least once a month) and although cinema viewership has declined in recent times, these figures are still staggering for they indicate the importance of

²A record number of Indian films reached the blockbuster status in the US in 2006 with half of the 14 foreign language films that grossed over US\$ 2mn being in Hindi. No other language came close to contributing so many box office hits to the list Kumar, A. (2006) *Hindi films boom in US, 7 break \$2mn barrier*. Retrieved on April, 14th 2006, from www.hindustantimes.com

³Indian diaspora constitutes more than 20 million people, settled in around 70 countries of the world.

⁴*Victim or ally - A study on the portrayal of tobacco in Indian cinema* (2003) Retrieved on June, 30th 2007, from the World Health Organization. (pp. 5)
<http://www.who.int/tobacco/communications/events/wntd/2003/bollywood/en/index.html>

⁵Film stars in India have had temples built in their honor by their fans, a good example of which is South Indian actress, Kushboo.

cinema in India. The survey also reveals that cinema viewership among urban Indian audiences is on the increase unlike in rural India. There were also 23 million regular theatre goers in urban India in 2005, in comparison to the 25 million in 2006⁶ It is also essential to note that although 39 million Indians go to the movies, the majority of these audiences are under the age group of 25, which is why most filmmakers target their films to this demographic group. In 2007, as audiences for Hindi film are getting younger, more and more Bollywood filmmakers are clamoring to jump onto the 'be young, have fun' bandwagon. The release of Bollywood youth films, especially in the years post 2000 bear testimony to this fact. Apart from sporting a fresh, youthful look, these films also have themes that the youth can identify with.

According to observers of the Hindi film industry, Indian filmmakers are increasingly being guided by the choices of this yuppie brigade which is fast replacing the family audiences of yesteryears.⁷ Producers are now open to the idea of making films that satisfy the desires of the younger crowds as they are finally realizing the untapped potential of the Indian teen market. "The youth are our biggest market", says leading Indian film producer Pahlaj Nihalani, while adding that young audiences are picky about the movies they watch because, "they want novelty, not the same old stuff."⁸ According to Harry Baweja, producer of 'Yeh Kya Ho Raha Hai' (2002), the Indianised Hindi film version of the Hollywood film American Pie (1999), "If you want to sell a product and recover its cost then it better appeal to the target audience." He felt that Hindi films would fare well at the box office if they targeted the cinema-going audience, the youth. Chandra also said there were added advantages of

⁶News Desk (2006) *NRS: 2006* - News papers driving print media growth in India. Retrieved on May, 29th 2006, from www.newswatchindia.com

⁷According to World Bank estimates for the year 2005, India had 200 million young people between the ages of 15-24 of which 74.8% are literate. Around 64% of the Indian population was below 35 years of age in 2005.

⁸Khanna, P. (2003) *To all youths, Bollywood calling*. Retrieved on February, 15th 2007, from www.bollywoodcountry.com

making a youth film, the biggest of which was the budget.⁹ Chandra observed that Indian filmmakers these days (i.e. 2003) consciously tried to make their film “look”, “sound” and “feel” good so that it appealed to the youth.¹⁰ For most filmmakers, youngsters usually mean business as they are frequent theaters goers, form a part of a brand-impressionable audience and also enjoy disposable incomes.¹¹ This makes them an exciting and more importantly a profitable segment to target.¹² The surge of youth in India also guarantees that popular cinema directed at young people will continue to increase and grow in importance. As societal and teen issues continue to change, so will the themes of popular youth movies and this can be confirmed by the changing trends within Indian cinema itself.

One such youth movie which broke new grounds in India in terms of its box office success, marketing, as well as audience response was the recent film, Rang De Basanti, (henceforth referred to as RDB the name by which this film is alluded to in the popular press in India) directed by Rakesh Om Prakash Mehra, which was released in India on the 26th of January 2006 so as to coincide with the Indian republic day. RDB, while being touted as one of the biggest releases of the year 2006 was also aggressively marketed months before its premier. This movie not only generated much buzz in the press for its realist storyline, lead actors and its promotional activities but also for the reactions it evoked from its audiences both before and after its release. Mehra’s film not only induced the public into organizing

⁹Youth films in Bollywood are usually not as expensive to produce as a family melodrama.

¹⁰Khanna, P. (2003) *To all youths, Bollywood calling*. Retrieved on February, 15th 2007, from www.bollywoodcountry.com

¹¹According to Indian advertising industry reports, 22% of the advertisement products cater to the youth and 59% of the advertisements are youth oriented.

¹²Industry estimates of the youth market state that Indian youngsters wield \$2.8 billion worth of discretionary income, and their families spend an additional \$3.7 billion on them every year. By 2015, Indians under 20 will make up 55% of the population and wield proportionately higher spending power.

candle-light marches and public protests on various issues of public interest but also motivated the youth to participate in politics. RDB thus stirred much debate in the Indian press for its portrayal of nationalism and the acts of citizenship it evoked from its young audiences.

1.1 Rang De Basanti- A synoptic overview

Rang De Basanti (Color me Saffron) tells us the story of Caucasian and Hindi speaking, British filmmaker, Sue, who comes to India to make a documentary on India's revolutionary and legendary freedom fighters, Bhagat Singh, Chandrashekar Azad, Sukhdev, Rajguru and Ashfaqullah Khan who were instrumental in India's struggle against the British. The five Indian youngsters she chooses to play the revolutionaries are Laxman Pandey (Atul Kulkarni), a Hindu fundamentalist with political aspirations; Daljit Singh called DJ (Aamir Khan), a Punjabi guy who is also an ex-student of the university and uninterested in the life outside the universities' gates; Aslam (Kunal Kapoor), a rational Muslim ; Sukhi (Sharman Joshi) , a fun loving guy primarily interested in women; Karan (Siddharth) a rich kid who dreams of settling abroad and shares an estranged relationship with his father; and Sonia (Soha Ali Khan) , a youth activist who is engaged to a patriotic pilot Ajay (Madhavan). The group of friends is at first unable to relate the characters they portray on screen. The film-within-a-film format allows Mehra to compare yesteryear's idealism (represented through the freedom fighters) with today's skepticism (represented through the portrayal of the friends) and as Sue continues to make the documentary, the idealism of India's revolutionary heroes' seeps into the protagonists. Somewhere during the making of the movie, the friends find themselves moved by the passion of the characters they play. They gradually begin to realize that their own lives are not very different from the actors they portray on the screen and that the same

state of affairs that once plagued the revolutionaries continues to torment the present generation.

While, previously it was the British Empire who played the villain, today this role is being essayed by contemporary politicians. Soon the barrier of time between the two generations begins to dissolve as the characters become one in spirit. The death of their close friend, Ajay, who dies like a hero, having averted a greater tragedy by crashing his MiG plane (inspired from a real life incident in India) into an empty field instead of trying to save his own life pushes their tolerance over their brink, as instead of honoring his martyrdom, the Indian government labels him as a careless novice so as to deflect media attention away from the details of the purchase of faulty Russian MiGs. The friends are devastated by Ajay's death and shocked by the corruption they encounter from the bureaucracy when they try to clear his name. This forces them to take action against the State. In the process of trying to cleanse the system, they take the law into their own hands and meet a tragic end. In the film, the docudrama shot by Sue of British India in the 1930s runs along with the main story and intersects it at decisive moments in the narration. The climax of the film sees the blurring of the past and the present, reiterating the idea that nationalism is not yet dead and that people need to wake up and be the change they talk about.

As Hindi film critic Dr. Chakravorty describes it, RDB is more than another patriotic film: it is a moral, social and political allegory. "By blending history along with the nationalist struggle, idealism and humanitarianism along with contemporary politics, religious fundamentalism, and the lack of social responsibility, Mehra provides us with a mirror to look inwards and think about the way we live and the choices we make."¹³ It was for this reason that audiences, especially youngsters, for whom daily life in India was on the lines depicted in RDB, found this film to be a slice of

¹³Chakravorty, M. (2006) *Rang De Basanti : A generation Awakens*. Retrieved on April, 15th 2007, from www.nr pulse.com

their own lives. RDB also ends with a strong message that it is not patriotic or right to be indifferent to what is going on in the country, and even more so in public life. Moreover, nor is it correct to sit on the fence and point fingers at all the things going wrong in a democracy like India. It stresses the idea that is very important for people to actively participate in the public sphere to bring about change in their country. “No country is perfect, it needs to be made perfect”¹⁴ and this is the message that Mehra’s film leaves the audience with. Interestingly enough, film critics even when discussing the movie in their reviews felt that RDB could lead to reflection, discussion and possibly even action among youngsters in India. It was for this reason that RDB enjoyed much publicity before and after its release. It also helped that this film had an interesting ensemble of novice and established actors starring in it and that the popular press declared the film to be one of the biggest releases of 2006.

While there is always the danger of popular cinema like RDB being labeled escapist, mere entertainment, and fantasy-oriented, it is very essential to understand the role it plays in motivating audiences to act in certain ways. For despite all its inanities and irrelevancies this cinema is ideology-filled and its raw material is the society of today. RDB, by focusing on the concerns of youngsters, operating from their perspective and speaking their language, conveyed the mindset of urban and educated youngsters in post-independent India. It therefore serves as a fertile ground to study issues of changing culture, identities, media consumption and audience effects among others. It is in this context that I study the consumption of RDB and the implications of the same on young audiences. RDB, as this thesis showcases, is an example of a distinctive case in which the consumption of a super commodified cinematic product revitalized citizenship among the youth in India.

¹⁴Direct quote from RDB.

1.2 Thesis Objectives

The central objective of this thesis is to explore whether the consumption of RDB stimulated citizenship among young audiences and caused an expansion of the public sphere in India. In order to answer this question, I examine RDB through the means of a multi-perspective approach. In the first part of the approach, I study audience response towards RDB by investigating blogs, discussion boards and news reports. I do this to showcase how a commercial Hindi film stimulated audiences to become politically active and socially responsible in society. Additionally, this audience analysis also serves as the base to understand the link between the consumption of RDB, citizenship (both on the Internet and in real life) and the expansion of the public sphere in India. In the second part of the approach, I examine RDB at the industry level using secondary data from the Indian advertising and film industry in order to study its market economics (especially its marketing and promotions). I investigate the above data to comprehend how RDB (a commercial and nationalist film) acquired the ‘social’ tag that helped it to be perceived in a positive manner by audiences. Thus, through a study of the economics behind RDB, I throw light on how the ‘social’ classification, public appeal and acts of citizenship witnessed in the wake of RDB’s release contributed to its public appeal and concealed its commercial motive. In the third part of this approach, I study RDB at the textual level using descriptive textual analysis in order to reveal how and why the realism in the content and style of RDB helped young Indians relate to the film, its message and inspired them into thinking about joining politics or contributing to social life. In other words, I examine Mehra’s filmmaking techniques and expose the role played by them in helping viewers emotionally connect with the characters, events and message of RDB while also stimulating them to become politically active.

A multi-perspective approach in this project offers readers a holistic picture of RDB’s impact. In addition, the biggest advantage of a multi-perspective approach is

its ability to offer multiple perspectives of the same event, while also providing suitable alternatives when examining media texts without traditional research methods like direct observation or focus groups. For example, the use of blogs, discussion boards and news articles to gauge audience reaction have enhanced this study by revealing the manner in which audiences exercise their citizenship on the Internet. While a multi-perspective approach is valuable to understand all the different aspects of the film, every research project comes with its own limitations. A shortcoming of this study was that it afforded few opportunities for direct observation of audience response towards RDB. As this study was dealing with a very specific event - the release of RDB in India during January 2006, an assessment of audience reaction towards the film would perhaps have been best achieved through direct observation and interview of youngsters in India. However, issues of location (this study was conducted in the US while RDB was released in India) and time (the lag between the release of the film in 2006 and the start of this study in 2007) did not permit this kind of research and it was keeping this reason in mind that a multi-perspective approach was chosen for this project.

Right at the beginning of this thesis it is also essential to keep in mind that though this project deals with the events of a particular case whose results cannot be generalized to understand the general behavior of audiences or media consumption in other instances, this case study is still important because it goes against the traditional perceptions of the relationship between entertainment, citizenship and the public sphere. While Habermas holds commercial media and entertainment responsible for the death of rational debate and the decline of the public sphere in a consumer society, this case study refutes this particular view. Looking at RDB as a unique example, I argue that commercial entertainment, which has traditionally been held responsible for a decline of active citizenship can also under certain circumstances also be responsible for stimulating active citizenship.

1.3 Chapter Overview

The first chapter of this thesis is called ‘consumption, citizenship and the public sphere’ and this chapter as its name suggests focuses on examining the relationship between consumption, citizenship and the public sphere through a study of blogs, discussion boards and newspaper articles. This first chapter reveals how the consumption of RDB successfully stimulated youngsters into becoming politically and socially active both on the Internet and in real life. For the purpose of this chapter and project, I define consumption as the viewing of RDB in the theatre or on VCR’s and DVD’s. In addition, I also look upon citizenship as the participation of young audiences in social or political life in India, whether electronically through blogging/lobbying or in public life through social activism/political participation on all issues of public interest.

Through my study of blogs and discussion boards, I first establish the link between viewing RDB and the rise of citizenship on the Internet. The release of RDB saw a record number of young Indians blogging about the film as well as discussing it on popular blog sites. In order to understand this phenomenon better, it is useful to review a few statistics on blogging in India. A survey on Internet usage in India during September 2006¹⁵, revealed that India had around 37 million Internet users with 23 million of them being categorized as active.¹⁶

Additionally, a news article in The Times of India newspaper declared that India had around 1.2 million bloggers. This article also disclosed the interesting fact that 86% of the Indian Internet users regularly visited blogs on the Internet, which was

¹⁵This survey was conducted by the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI), a non profit organization, in association with IMRB (Indian Market Research Bureau) in September 2006.

¹⁶For the purpose of this survey, a user was defined as someone who had used the Internet at least once in his/her lifetime. Active users were defined as people who could access the Internet at least once every month. News Release (2006) *32% per cent active internet users rely on the internet as the primary source of information and for research*. Retrieved on April, 15th 2007, from IMAI (the Internet and mobile association of India)
http://www.iamai.in/section.php3?secid=15&press_id=1252&mon=10

why the paper declared that, “blogging and [I]nternet have well and truly become a mass medium in India.”¹⁷ Blogging in India is in 2007 not just limited to the Internet but is also taking place on mobile phones on what is being called m-blogging. This type of instant blogging is very popular among Indian youngsters as they are more likely to own a cellular phone with an Internet connection than a personal computer. Additionally, as India has more than 156 million mobile phone subscribers, m-blogging is now slated to become an even bigger phenomenon than blogging on the web. Blogging as a phenomenon is therefore here to stay and this fact is perhaps best demonstrated by the individuals (especially youngsters) who blogged on RDB and other issues related to it.

Young Indian bloggers and audiences who argued and debated about RDB on the Internet (as well as in real life) were able to emotionally connect with RDB largely due to the realism of its style and content employed by Mehra in it. These audiences moved by RDB’s story and message not only reviewed the film on the Internet but also encouraged blog readers and other audiences to watch the film and heed its message. In addition, niche audiences like bloggers who endlessly discussed RDB on the Internet also used the public space of their blogs to showcase their individual efforts to participate in social and political fabric of the Indian public space. This novel exercise of blogging as citizenship, prominently visible on the Internet, provided Indian youngsters the opportunity to publicly affirm their status as citizens. The demonstration of citizenship through reason, argument and debate not only helped expand the public sphere on the Internet and in real life but also aided in the creation of a community of socially responsibly youngsters who used the message of RDB to display their political citizenship in real life. Thus, real life acts of citizenship like

¹⁷Dohbal, S. (2006) *Net’s cast wider than you thought*. Retrieved on April, 15th 2007, from <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/1708175.cms>

public demonstrations and protest marches not only resulted in policy changes by the Indian government but also helped revitalize the very spirit of democracy in India.

The second chapter titled, ‘RDB and marketing’ evaluates the relationship between the marketing strategies of RDB and its resultant economic and social success. This chapter reveals how the marketing strategies of RDB and the acts of citizenship in the period following its release helped it to be classified as a social film and win over public sentiments. This chapter looks into the production and economics of RDB to comprehend why (and how) Mehra marketed his film on the lines of a fast moving consumer good (FMCG)¹⁸ than like a creative media product.

The investigation of RDB’s marketing strategies in this chapter reveals that because 40% of its production budget (unlike the usual 5% of a typical Bollywood film) was spent on marketing and publicity, RDB was expected to recover all of its production costs through advertising/promotions if not through the sales of its tickets and music rights.¹⁹ It was keeping this in mind that UTV probably decided to tie-up with Coca Cola. The producers of RDB coordinated heavily with Coca Cola to promote RDB and Coke both before and after its release. It is also essential to note that RDB’s tie-ups were not limited to Coca Cola but extended to numerous other brands as well. However, because RDB’s brand partnerships were not being written about in the popular Indian press and because RDB was inspiring acts of citizenship in India, Mehra’s film was solely perceived as social text whose motive was to better society. The paradox of RDB being perceived as a social film in spite of its commercial undertakings forms the crux of the second chapter. Last but not the least; the second research chapter analyzes the current equation between advertisers and filmmakers in

¹⁸FMCG - A marketing terminology used to refer to consumer durables/goods that have a high consumer demand and are also widely marketed.

¹⁹Pfanner. E. (2006) *India’s new cinema has a global script*. Retrieved on April, 15th 2007, from <http://www.iht.com/articles/2006/05/21/yourmoney/movies22.php>

India by looking upon RDB as a case that is indicative of the ever increasing presence of advertisers in Bollywood.

The third and final research chapter, ‘realism and cinema’ picks up from where the first (the study of audience response towards RDB) and second (RDB’s paradoxical classification as a social film) chapters end. The textual analysis in this chapter showcases how the trope of realism employed by Mehra in RDB helped him emotionally connect and bond with young Indian audiences. The various levels of realism (especially on the level of narration and style) in RDB not only enabled audiences to identify with the characters and the events in the story but also inspired them to imbibe RDB’s message in real life. Thus, audiences who were moved by RDB and wanted to make a difference now felt more encouraged to blog, rationally discuss and debate about the film and other related issues on the Internet as well as in real life. This desire to make a difference and change society also ultimately manifested in acts of citizenship when community of audiences and youngsters took to the streets to protest and lobby on various public interest issues. This youth activism not only helped revitalize citizenship and expand the public sphere in India but also demonstrated the power of Bollywood in India.

In sum, the brief description of the above chapters should make it clear that the central questions of this thesis encompass the broad fields of entertainment, politics and cinema. RDB as a unique and relevant case study will not only broaden a readers understanding of the sub-areas of consumption of commercial entertainment, citizenship and the public sphere but will also address the gap in theoretical literature that exists in the above area at present. Thus, it is keeping this quest in mind that I have embarked on this research project.

CHAPTER 2

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As the central research question of this thesis asked whether the consumption of RDB resulted in a the rise in citizenship, the research method for this project needed to be specifically located at the intersection of the areas of consumption of commercial entertainment, citizenship and the public sphere. These factors when combined with the nature of the phenomena, i.e. a single film, demanded that the research for this project be descriptive and interpretative in its format. Descriptive research is not only geared towards documenting and understanding a phenomenon of interest but also looks into examining the beliefs, attitudes and responses of the people towards the occurrence, which in this case was the consumption of the RDB and the response of the audience towards it.

The specificity of this project necessitated that the case study as a specific research strategy be adopted for the purpose of this thesis. A case study can be understood as, “the intensive study of a single case where the purpose of that study is -at least in part- to shed light on a larger class of (a population)”. (Gerring, 2007 pp.20) The case study as a research approach helps bring interesting, real-world situations into the academic arena so as to investigate its usefulness and applicability with regard to theory. Case studies thus serve as useful starting points while investigating larger phenomena in the social sciences as they provide researchers with the context to understand and generalize a smaller groups’ behavior and compare them to that of a larger population. According to Gerring, to classify a work as a case-study could mean, “(a) that its method is qualitative, small- N (b) that the research is holistic,

thick (c) that it utilizes a particular type of evidence, (d) that its method of evidence gathering is naturalistic, a real life context (e) that the research employs triangulation and that (f) the research investigates the multiple properties of a single observation” (Gerring, 2007, pp.17)

Keeping the above points in mind, the case study approach was deemed to be most suitable for the following reasons- the unit of analysis was a single film. Additionally, as this study was qualitative in format, the very nature of the research required a holistic analysis of the film. It was for this reason that a “thick” description (Geertz, C. 1973, pp. 3), one that looked towards investigating all the properties of RDB, was considered to be most appropriate. Additionally, as the evidence gathering in this study was naturalistic, i.e. it came from a real life event (the making, release and audience response towards RDB), the data for the project was also collected from different sources (including a textual analysis of RDB and a study of blogs, discussion boards among others). Furthermore, triangulation whose principle can be understood as, “collecting information from a diverse range of individuals and settings, using a variety of methods”, (Maxwell.1996, pp.75) was made possible in this project through a multidimensional approach to studying RDB. This approach included examining RDB at the (a) textual level (b) industrial level while also (c) studying audience response towards it. Audience response to RDB was primarily gauged through, (1) the investigation of blogs and discussion boards and (2) news reports. This multi perspective approach not only improves the validity of the data collected but also helps provide readers with a better understanding of the multiple facets of the film.

2.1 Audience Analysis

Audience response to RDB and the relationship between consumption of commercial entertainment and hypothesized increased citizenship was evaluated through the

study of blogs, discussion boards and news reports. For the purpose of this project, the sampling method used to select blogs and discussion boards was purposeful in nature. Purposive sampling can be defined as, “a strategy in which particular settings, persons, or events are selected deliberately in order to provide important information that can’t be gotten as well from other choices”. (Maxwell, 1996 pp.70) Purposive sampling was judged to be the best method to select blogs and discussion boards on the Internet due to the need to ensure the representativeness of blogs on the Internet. Moreover, as it was impossible to track down all of the blogs and discussion boards that dealt with RDB and draw a truly random sample from them, a wide array of methods were used to select blogs and discussion boards. This was done primarily ensure that the blogs selected covered a variety of issues and were thus a good representation of the blogs on the Internet. The first method for selecting a blog involved looking for blogs through the Google search engine. All the top five blogs that appeared on the Google search, when the following search terms were used, ‘RDB and civil society’, ‘RDB and political engagement’, ‘RDB and blogging’, ‘RDB and the public sphere’ were included in the sample of blogs chosen for the study.¹ The second method involved the selection of blogs based on their writers and for this purpose five blogs written by prominent journalists from and in India were selected to be a part of the sample. The journalists were chosen based on the popularity of their blogs as well as the popularity of the newspapers they worked for.² The third method involved the selection of top five blogs on RDB as chosen by two prominent blog sites in India,

¹The search terms used to generate blogs were selected keeping in mind the specific yet broad frame work of issues relating to blogs discussing citizenship and political participation. On search engines, it becomes vital to enter specific search terminologies in order to generate relevant results. It was for this reason that search terms relating to the topic of study were used to search blogs.

²The five journalists whose blogs were selected to be a part of the final sample in this study were first narrowed down using Google search and the search term ‘journalists, blogs and RDB’. The top 15 blogs that were selected in this manner were evaluated for their popularity based on their blog readership as well as the number of people responding to the post on RDB.

DesiPundit³ and Blogbharti.⁴ Thus, three specific methods were employed to short list the blogs chosen to represent the final sample.

The blogs selected were then evaluated for any or all of the following: their recognition of RDB as a super commercial film with a social message that had unintended consequences; their engagement with RDB's message and their subsequent discussions of social, political, economic issues in India; their use of RDB's theme or imagery to organize social or political protest in India; and their use of RDB screenplay/songs to throw light on the social/political situation in India. However, what the blogs were not evaluated for was their descriptive analysis or review of RDB. In sum, the sample of blogs selected for this project were analyzed for the way their writers used the public space of the Internet to engage with RDB on political and social issues concerning them as ordinary citizens.

Discussion boards on the Internet for this project were also selected through the Google search engine. The top 5 discussion boards that appeared when the following search term, 'RDB and discussion boards' were used, were selected to be a part of the sample for the discussion boards. News articles from all prominent Indian newspapers (that offered an online edition) were also examined in order to ascertain real life acts of citizenship inspired by RDB. News articles have been supplemented by news footage from news channels across India when available.

The sample size of blogs chosen to evaluate audience response was thirty five in number. In addition to the thirty five blogs, five discussion boards were also analyzed to gauge audience response. The sample blogs were analyzed for their acts of citizenship and participation in public life with the help of an evaluation sheet

³DesiPundit links the best of Indian blogs and is regularly read by Indian bloggers. The site also links Hindi and Tamil blogs in addition to blogs in English. DesiPundit's objectives include freedom of speech, to raise awareness about blogs in India and to provide a credible voice to Indian blogs in the mainstream media.

⁴Blogbharti is also an aggregator of Indian blogs like DesiPundit.

whose categories were constructed after an initial examination of the blogs. The questions in the evaluation sheet were designed after investigating the blogs for their frequency (number of appearances of a topic/issue in the sample), space (size of the issue) and intensity (importance accorded to an issue).⁵ The sample blogs were examined keeping in mind the categories mentioned in the evaluation sheet and once all the blogs had been assessed, the broad themes that emerged from the analysis were used as a starting point to gauge audience response towards RDB. The themes and issues derived from the blogs were then compared with newspaper reports of actual citizenship in India in order to verify whether the political activism on the Internet was actually playing out in real life. This study of blogs and newspaper reports has helped me provide a complete picture of audience response to RDB.

2.2 Industrial Analysis

At the industrial level, a film can be examined in terms of its production, distribution and economics. In this part of the research, secondary data analysis was conducted to gain an in depth understanding of the market economics of RDB and to comprehend the relationship between the advertising Industry in India and Bollywood. This type of economic characterization is commonly referred to as an industry analysis and involves the collection of information that enhances the understanding of the film's political economy. I have analyzed RDB in terms of its production by examining who produced it and financed it and in terms of its economics by examining its box office revenues, marketing and advertising strategies. For the industry analysis in this thesis, I relied on secondary data from trade journals, business magazines and business news reports from specialized trade websites in India. All the secondary

⁵The evaluation sheet forms a part of the appendix.

data that was collected for the purpose of this research fell into or was related to one (or all) of the following areas:

- Indian film industry - (production , distribution and economics)
- Marketing and promotions of films in Bollywood
- Film piracy in India
- Corporatization of Bollywood
- Product placements in Bollywood
- Indian advertising industry- market report

The sources of secondary data in this analysis included; market report of the Indian film industry from the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI); film and advertising industry reports from magazines such as ‘India times’ and ‘India Today’, and finally marketing strategies of RDB and new Bollywood films from specialized websites such as ‘rediff.com’ and ‘Indian television and advertising.com’. The analysis arrived at in this section is a result of tying up the various singular factors discussed in the reports and trade journals of the relationship between advertisers and filmmakers. This is because articles that addressed issues related to Indian advertising and film usually only dealt with a single aspect or trend related to the film or the product (like product placements or piracy etc) and did not offer a bird’s eye perspective of the advertising or the film industry. However, my cross analysis of the data from the advertising and film industry not only reveals the close relationship between them but also highlights the role and influence of advertisers in Bollywood.

2.3 Textual Analysis

At the textual level, cinema is studied in terms of its style, content and aesthetics. The descriptive analysis of a film's content usually requires a multidimensional reading so as to help the researcher understand its narratives, ideologies, representations and constructions. Textual analysis as a method of study therefore helps in unraveling the meanings, values, and ideologies existent in cultural texts. I therefore used textual analysis to examine the style and narrative structure of RDB and to showcase how the realism in RDB helped young Indians relate to the film and its message. This analysis of RDB was necessary because the story of RDB was inspired from real life historical events in India, including the Indian independence movement and the death of 29-year-old Flight Lt Abhijit Gadgil who died in a MiG crash on September 17, 2001 in India among others. Additionally, I also investigated the stylistic aspects of RDB, to see if Mehra used, "specific techniques in patterned ways." (Bordwell, D. and Thompson, K., 2004 pp.175) The specific techniques that were analyzed as a part of style for this project included mise-en-scene, cinematography, editing, and sound. Furthermore, the content of RDB, i.e. its narrative, was also examined in order to understand the film's overall form.

CHAPTER 3

RDB - CONSUMPTION, CITIZENSHIP AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

The Hindi film Rang De Basanti released early this year became a kind of anthem of new-found social concern and public activism for India's educated urban youth, who have so far distinguished themselves largely by their immersion in self-enrichment to the exclusion of all else, in globalizing India.¹

Quote from a blog on RDB

In this chapter, I argue that viewing RDB influenced people to exercise their rights as citizens and that this resulted in active citizenship both in public life as well as on the Internet and also led to an expansion of the public sphere in India. Through the analysis of blogs, discussion boards and news articles in this chapter, I not only gauge the audience response to RDB but also showcase the manner and extent of RDB's influence on audiences. RDB as a unique case goes against the traditional views' of the relationship between entertainment, citizenship and the public sphere. While Habermas argues that the commercialization of mass media has contributed to the death of rational debate and the decline of active citizenship and the public sphere, RDB as a case study counters the view that consumption of commercial media causes a decline in civic citizenship. In fact the study of blogs and discussion boards on RDB

¹1. Rama (2006, November 9) *Commitment Revealed*. Blog entry. Retrieved on April, 20th 2007, from <http://cuckooscall.blogspot.com/search/label/films>

in this project reveals that not only did they help promote dialogue and debate but they also enriched public life by promoting citizenship and participative democracy. The ensuing sections will not only lay down the theoretical framework to understand consumption, citizenship and the Habermasian public sphere but will also investigate the impact of the Internet on the public sphere.

3.1 Consumption and Citizenship

Consumption, which has traditionally been perceived as a private activity has been gaining much scholarly attention in recent times for bridging the gap between the private and the public (political and cultural) realms. Consumption of media images by giving consumers the room to exercise their rights as citizens, can help in the intersection of the private and the public spheres. In the next section, I unravel the relationship between media consumption and citizenship by analyzing the scholarship of Nestor Garcia Canclini (2001).

The capacity of consumption (of consumer goods) to turn ordinary individuals into politically active citizens has been well documented by scholars T.H. Breen (2004)² and Lizabeth Cohen (2003)³ who in their historical study of the United States reveal how consumer goods provoked meaningful political participation and citizenship. Keeping in mind the power of consumption (of goods) to stimulate citizenship and overcome the split between the private and public realms, it is now also possible think on similar (but not related) lines about media consumption and the power of media images/representations to encourage and promote citizenship (both political and cultural), especially in a neo-liberal atmosphere where people are vested with the

²Breen's book, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* reveals how non-consumption of British consumer goods helped unite Americans from different colonies during Americas War of Independence against the Britain in the 1700s.

³Lizabeth Cohen in, *A Consumers Republic* analyzes the link between consumption and citizenship in America from the late 19th century up onto the late 1950s.

agency to bring about a change in public policy through the active implementation of their rights and duties as both citizens and consumers.

Nestor Garcia Canclini in his book, *Citizens and Consumers* argues that citizenship in a globalized world cannot be restricted the political realm but would also need to incorporate social and cultural citizenship (brought about by consumption of goods and services which also include the media).⁴ Canclini states, “[f]or many men and women ... the questions specific to citizenship, such as how we inform ourselves and who represents our interests, are answered more often than not through private consumption of commodities and media offerings than through the abstract rules of democracy or through participation in discredited political organizations.” (Canclini, 2001 pp.5)

While Canclini’s definition of citizenship highlights the importance of social and cultural citizenship he does not in any way discount the importance of political citizenship or participation. In fact it is for this reason that he asks people to evaluate citizenship through the act of consumption, “approach citizenship without disassociating it from those activities through which we establish our social belonging, our social networks and which in this globalized era are steeped in consumption”. (Canclini, 2001 pp.20) Canclini contends that globalization has made it possible for people to become engaged citizens not just through democratic processes like voting but also through the consumption of commodities, services and images.⁵ According to Canclini, media consumption not only provides people with a strong sense of identity but

⁴Canclini looks upon citizenship as being related to culture, i.e. cultural citizenship in which, “citizenship is seen not only in relation to rights accorded by state institutions to those born within their territorial jurisdiction, but also as social and cultural practices that confer a sense of cultural belonging, provide a sense of difference and enable the satisfaction of the needs of those who possess a given language and organize themselves in certain ways.”. (Canclini, 2001 pp.20)

⁵Canclini argues that arguing that media consumption, i.e. consumption of images plays an important role in citizenship as it affects people’s perceptions of their self identity as well as their identity as a larger group. He argues that identities need not necessarily be shaped by the nation state or citizenship and that they can also be shaped by cultural citizenship in the market.

also generates social bonds/communities, influences peoples' perceptions of citizenship and impacts their actions as engaged citizens.⁶ Furthermore, Canclini does not see the transition to an era of consumption as a loss of any sort but only perceives it as an expansion of (cultural) citizenship because citizens as active consumers (of goods and images) are now being influenced by media representations to demand rights and services (like: housing, education, welfare etc) from the government. Canclini argues that in the neo-liberal atmosphere, the mass media and market are able to meet the needs of citizens and consumers more successfully than that of the State. He states, "[d]isillusioned with state, party, and union bureaucracies, the publics turn to radio and television to receive what citizen institutions could not deliver: services, justice, reparations, or just attention" (Canclini, 2001 pp. 21-23). It is keeping these ideas in mind that Canclini concludes that citizenship through the market can help people gain political influence and shape public policy.

An aspect of globalization that concerns Canclini and also relates to citizenship is the disintegration of cities. Canclini argues that cities (due to sub-urbanization and fragmentation) are no longer the centre of civic life but have degenerated in the process of unequal development brought about by numerous factors including the market. Additionally, mass migrations, inadequate housing and conflicts of various kinds have reduced the quality of life in the city resulting in the abandonment of

⁶A similar argument is made by Arlene Davila in her 2001 book, *Latinos, Inc.: The Marketing and Making of a People*. In this book Davila like Canclini questions whether consumption can bring about changes in the marketplace, while arguing that cultural consumption, i.e. consumption of images (especially advertising and marketing) affects people's perceptions of their self identity as well as their identity as a larger group. She argues that identities need not necessarily be shaped by the nation state or citizenship and that they can also be shaped by cultural citizenship in the market. Media images and representations are vital as they not only help improve the self image of minority groups by making them more visible to all publics but also because they give people the opportunity to voice their concerns in society. The market through cultural citizenship can help people gain political influence and shape policy in the long run. Therefore, media images mediated by the market can assist people with understanding their rights as well as enabling them secure to entitlements. Although, Davila envisions the possibility of consumption as helping people secure rights and entitlements, she makes it clear that this process is wrought with problems and that citizenship through the market although possible is still only a distant realization.

public places as sites of collective participation and citizenship. Therefore, traditional means of political participation like public protests and boycotts are no longer a big part of a citizen's life. However, by stating the above Canclini does not mean that political citizenship is on the decline but only that the coming of a consumer society has altered the ways by which people exercise their citizenship. From an analysis of consumption and citizenship it becomes clear that media consumption can not only bring forth political citizenship but also open up vistas for the development of social and cultural citizenship. However, this positive view of the media (especially commercial entertainment) as contributing to citizenship and expanding the public sphere is problematized by Habermas in his discussion of the public sphere.

3.2 The creation of the public sphere

Habermas published, '*The creation of the public sphere*' in 1962 and in this he argued that a new public sphere emerged in the late 18th century in parts of Western Europe. This public sphere served to mediate between the private sphere and the state, i.e. between the social and the public life of people. The creation of this sphere was made possible when rational debate aided by self-consciousness enabled private individuals to overcome their differences and come together to form a collective public.⁷ This public sphere comprised of people as well as parliaments, newspapers, pubs and coffee houses, in short any public arena where rational debate was possible. Habermas felt that this public sphere could help keep in control the actions of the State while also watching over the interests shaping the private sphere. Moreover, it was in this arena that the media, especially newspapers were envisioned to play a

⁷Habermas argued that reflexive self-consciousness and public reason, (a part of the enlightenment movement in Europe) were vital to the constitution of the public sphere. Additionally, self-consciousness and critical rationality were not only enhanced by newspapers but also sharpened by arguments and public debates on artistic and literary works in coffee houses and salons, places that would later become the hub of political discussion.

vital role. Newspapers in the eighteenth century not only encouraged public opinion and debate but also adequately represented the needs of the general public. It was for this reason that they helped promote the active participation of people in the society.

Habermas along with other Frankfurt school scholars was of the opinion that the arrival of the welfare state and industrialization towards the mid 19th century caused this thriving public sphere to decline. Soon after, the State along with other institutions including the culture industries took over the media and the public sphere. As the functioning of the public sphere declined, people's participation in public life also turned passive. The media which had once aided lively public debate was now controlled by elites who limited public opinion and promoted their own interests, motivated by their need for increased profits. Rational debate was therefore no longer a feature of the public sphere in a democratic society. Habermas also felt that during this period, the relationship of individuals to the State changed as rational citizens turned into passive consumers of goods and services under the aegis of the welfare state.⁸ Habermas' idea of the public sphere has been highly influential for studying the relationship between media and the creation of a democratic public space. Habermas also set the foundation for communication researchers to look towards media as a key element in a democracy. Habermas's work is particularly useful to examine in this context for he clearly draws a link between the commercialization/deterioration of the media and the collapse of the public sphere.

Habermas' work also gains importance in recent times due to the advent of new media technologies like the Internet. These technologies have been credited with the potential to revive the public sphere due to their democratizing capacities. This next

⁸Habermas was of the opinion that the public sphere also deteriorated due to the existence of unequal power relations between citizens and the welfare state. Robert, M.J and Crossley, N. (Ed's)(2004) highlight this aspect in the introduction of their book, *After Habermas - New perspectives on the public sphere*. The authors argue that the patronization of welfare saw, "citizens offer the state legitimacy (in the form of votes for parties and basic compliance with the laws)in return for the benefits of the welfare State"(pp.8)

section therefore not only discusses the impact of the Internet on the public sphere but also contends that the Internet can extend the boundaries of the public sphere. The theoretical analysis of the relationship between the Internet and the public sphere is valuable in this project because it is public dialogue and rational debate (inspired by RDB) that encouraged political engagement and fueled blogging as citizenship on the Internet.

New media technologies like the Internet are credited by many scholars, the optimists as they are called, for having the capacity to empower citizens and revive democracy. (Toffler, H. and Toffler, M 1995, Negroponte, N. 1995) These scholars are of the opinion that the Internet aids the creation of an interactive public space, one in which people can forge new social relationships and communities. The optimists argue that deliberation and rational discussion on the Internet through discussion boards, blogs and other forums can help people form and represent public opinion on various issues of common interest. Additionally, access to information on issues of public interest can empower citizens to become politically aware and provide them with an opportunity to participate in public life.

James Bohman in his article, '*Expanding Dialogue: The Internet, the public sphere and the prospects for transnational democracy*' points out that the Internet as a transnational public sphere would have to meet the needs of a variety of publics (unlike the single bourgeois public of the Habermasian public sphere) if it intends to sustain itself over a period of time. Although Bohman does not question the potential of the Internet to act as a public sphere he does ask us to consider questions regarding equality of access and equality of participation in an electronic democracy.⁹ To Bohman a dialogical public sphere is one in which, "all participants may mutually

⁹Critics of the Internet validly argue that though the Internet permits the distribution of power in civil society (through the decentralization of information) it still excludes certain groups from participating in the process of communication and that this factor limits its ability to function as a truly democratic space.

make claims on each other, in that they address and are addressed by each other in terms of the claims that every speaker puts forth as something that others ought to accept". (Bohman, pp.152) This above idea comes from the Habermasian view of the public sphere as a place in which all participants have an equal right to convey their opinions and respond to the views of others regarding them. Thus, it becomes clear that the Internet will function as a public sphere when people use it to engage in reflexive and deliberative communication and when the medium becomes accessible to all.¹⁰

One of the most useful ways to evaluate the prospects of the Internet to function as the public sphere given its inherent limitations comes from Mark Poster in, '*Cyberdemocracy: The Internet and the Public Sphere*.' Poster argues that if the print media and the values of enlightenment helped create a 'modern' society and an individual who was rational, autonomous and stable (Poster, 1995) then new technologies facilitated the birth of a postmodern society and created an individual whose identity was fractured, unstable and fragmented. Poster also argues against what he calls the "impossible ideal" (Poster, pp.219) of the Habermasian public sphere which is its narrow focus on rationality, face to face communication and the stress on a single public.¹¹ Poster who looks upon the Internet as a public/social space also contends that it has the capacity to democratize subjects because its' users are not subject to

¹⁰Corporate organizations and nation states are increasingly seeking to control information on the Internet through the installation of security firewalls and other security measures. Access to information on the Internet is in some cases being controlled by gatekeepers.

¹¹It is essential to note that Habermas's ideal of the public sphere has been subject to wide criticism from poststructuralists and feminists alike. Feminists like Nancy Fraser (1990) have criticized the gender biases of the Habermasian public sphere as it failed to account for gender differences while poststructuralist's rejected this model because they felt that it universalized and essentialized values of rationality and autonomy while also promoting the notion of a 'single' public and failing to account for "subaltern counterpublics". (Crossley, N. and Roberts, M.J. pp. 14). The postmodern school was of the opinion that a truly public discussion would need to entail the inclusion of minority groups in the process of communication while recognizing the fact that the process of deliberation can in no way alter the inequalities and power relations that historically exist between the various groups.

the limitations of gender, race or even face to face communication. Thinking on the above lines, Poster contends that communication on the Internet need not be limited to that of a single public and can encompass previously excluded groups while also accommodating multiple spheres of discussion. While Poster acknowledges that the Internet cannot eliminate all the inequalities and power-relationships present in existing forms of communication, he still argues that the Internet can perform the duties of the public sphere without “actually being one”. (Poster, pp.224) Poster’s model of the relationship between the Internet and the public sphere is insightful to understand how new technologies like blogs shape human behavior and constitute new identities.

Keeping in mind all the above arguments, I contend that while the Internet may not replace the Habermasian public sphere it cannot be denied that it does extend its reach by overcoming some of its earlier drawbacks. In other words, the Internet can and does provide a medium for disparate people to form social networks (based on common interest) and communicate meaningfully with each other. Furthermore, the Internet can also foster critical reasoning, self- reflection and argumentative debate among users who do not know each other. Thus, the Internet now offers wide scope for a connection that is not only immediate but also personal, social and political which in turn provides tremendous potential for the empowerment of society.

3.3 Blogging, eh?

The word blog is an acronym for a ‘web-log’, or a website on the Internet that lets individuals host journal entries in chronological order. Blogging is popular because it lets people create a log without any technical knowledge or expense.¹² Blogging initially began as a means for people to communicate their personal views to a larger

¹²According to ‘Technorati’ the popular blog site, April 2007 saw the existence of over 70 million weblogs worldwide.

public. However, blogs today are no longer the simple online dairies of the past and have gained popularity among various organizations including corporate houses and non governmental organizations for their interactivity. Blogs by permitting readers to post opinions and comments on articles transform the mere act of writing into a dialogue of sorts. The other advantages associated with blogs include their immediacy (of content) and speed (of publishing). According to an interesting study conducted by Colin Daniels, director of the New Media Lab at Rhodes University (South Africa), blogs get more readership and feedback because they are perceived to be a part of the community.¹³ Today blogs are increasingly being viewed as a part of the ‘bottom-up’ social movement; one that allows individuals to express their opinions on various issues while bypassing the gatekeepers common to traditional media.

3.4 Analysis of blogs on RDB

What follows in this section is an assessment of ways in which bloggers expressed their engagement with RDB on the Internet. Bloggers used RDB to discuss a wide range of public interest issues and I use the broad themes of these issues to discuss the link between consumption, citizenship and the public sphere.

3.4.1 Political Discussion

The majority of blogs in the sample used RDB as a stepping stone to discuss the political situation in India. Discussion of political issues/ events on Indian blogs increased significantly for a short period following the January release of the film in the Indian subcontinent.¹⁴ Bloggers (usually) began their posts by discussing the

¹³Daniel’s study in 2004 investigated the competitiveness of newspapers to their official blog by studying the South African newspaper the *Mail and Guardian* and its blog, Blogmark (<http://blogmark.mg.co.za>)

¹⁴My study of blogs by Indian youngsters on the blog sites Blogbharti and Blogger revealed that political discussion was not prevalent in general blogs. Youngsters on the above sites preferred to write about their personal life, interests and current events. The political discussion in these blogs

realist manner in which RDB captured the political angst of the urban-educated Indian youth and then went on to draw parallels between the current politicians in India and the corrupt politicians of RDB. A large number of bloggers used their blogs to critique Indian politicians for ignoring concerns of the middle class, especially on issues relating to the provision of public services like housing, education and jobs. Bloggers used the depiction of government inefficiency in RDB to highlight the plight of Indian democracy during 2006. Bloggers inspired by the characters in RDB also demanded public services and basic amenities from the government through their posts. Viewing RDB thus motivated individuals to don the mantle of citizens and demand better services and amenities (like transportation and health services) from the Indian government.

Bloggers also strongly condemned the corruption and bureaucracy existing in Indian society. This criticism was inspired directly by the negative depiction of the State and politicians in RDB. In fact many bloggers stated that they could relate to RDB because it portrayed the truth about Indian politics and society. It was in this context that young bloggers censured Indian politicians in power (both in the ruling party and opposition) for their political decisions and behavior¹⁵ especially in relation to issues of specific concern to them like reservation in educational institutions, censorship of media and communal riots between Hindus and Muslims in India. RDB makes passing references to all of these issues excluding that of reservation. In one instance, a blogger disillusioned by the present state of Indian politics (which was ag-

was limited to breaking political news stories, if any. However, in the wake of RDB these general and film-oriented blogs began to discuss current political issues or political issues highlighted in RDB. Additionally, bloggers who watched RDB also used this opportunity to discuss related political issues and the need for youngsters to turn into socially responsible and politically active citizens. Not only was the political and social discussion (on the Internet) instrumental in rekindling the interest in the Abhijit Gadgil, Jessica Lal and Priyadarshini Mattoo cases but it also helped youngsters bring back to public attention the much contended issue of reservation in educational institutions.

¹⁵Indian politicians have been sharply criticized for their indecorous behavior in the parliament, instances which include physical violence and lack of propriety. Bloggers therefore utilized this opportunity to condemn the behavior of politicians by using the politicians in RDB as an example.

gravated after watching RDB, as his blog post indicated) wrote, "... one is struck by the complete and callous way that the politics of the country has been divorced from the aspirations of the common man. The present government will go down in history as the most dishonest government we have ever had: they have succeeded in dividing the country even further. The society will be ruined by these evil politicians. Its time to have a Rang De Basanti type resurgence because elections have failed to achieve the freedom for the common man in our flawed democracy."¹⁶ This sort of rhetoric was common to blogs that discussed politics in the context of RDB. This analysis of politically vibrant blogs clearly indicates that RDB helped encourage debate among audiences especially in relation to political issues. Additionally, blogging inspired by RDB also helped people in expressing their political sentiments and sharing them with other people on the Internet.

One interesting aspect about the blogs that used RDB to discuss politics was the high level of audience response they attracted from Internet users. This instantaneous interaction between bloggers and readers was enabled by the public space of the Internet as it facilitated disparate people to engage with each other on matters of common national interest. Thus, the Internet as public realm reflected people's divergent opinions and aroused meaningful political discussions where people were not only responsive to other's opinions but also self-critical and reflexive. The above quoted blog for example, elicited an interesting response from a reader who advised the blogger to, "learn from Rang De Basanti to change the country, to improve the system and not simply to complain. So yes, Rang De Basanti is required, but not in a negative sense but in positive sense. Jai Hind"¹⁷ (emphasis not mine) Thus the blogger who

¹⁶Gupta, D. (2006) *Time for Rang De Basanti in India* Retrieved on April, 14th 2006, from <http://media.sulekha.com/blog/post/2007/04/time-for-rang-de-basanti-in-india.htm>

¹⁷Blog comment retrieved from Gupta, D. (2006). *Time for Rang De Basanti in India*. Retrieved on April, 14 2007, from <http://media.sulekha.com/blog/post/2007/04/time-for-rang-de-basanti-in-india.htm>

criticized the current state of Indian politics and called for a revolution in India was duly chastised for not attempting to do anything to personally change the political and social system in anyway but for merely complaining about it. This line of thinking is directly inspired from RDB as the movie asked youngsters to go beyond complaining and to become the change that they want to see in the country. Consumption of RDB in this instance helped affect the political perceptions of youngsters in India (with specific regard to those youngsters who used blogs/message boards to discuss RDB).

Bloggers with avid interest in politics used RDB to discuss the manifestos of major political parties in India, especially the Hindutva¹⁸ ideology of the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party)¹⁹ and the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh)²⁰ as these are referred to in the movie. Additionally, youngster's blogging on RDB strongly condemned Hindu nationalism and other forms of extremism (including Muslim fundamentalism) that deviated from the principles of secularism as advocated by the constitution of India. Using the example of Aslam and Laxman Pandey (who play the role of a Muslim and a Hindu party worker cum nationalist in RDB), bloggers highlighted the manner in which political parties employed religion to divide the country and secure an electoral majority. Netizens therefore used RDB to counter the rhetoric of Hindutva and Muslim fundamentalism. To help strengthen their argument against the evils of religious fundamentalism bloggers also mentioned the communal riots of Godhra and

¹⁸Hindutva refers to Hindu nationalism or pro-Hindu ideology.

¹⁹The Bharatiya Janata Party is one of the two major national political parties in India. The party is closely associated with the Hindu organization the RSS and other pro Hindu organizations. The party promotes conservative social policies and Hindu religious and cultural values.

²⁰The RSS is a Hindu nationalist organization in India and was founded in 1925 and is active in India and outside. The RSSB seeks to recruit individuals to promote the Hindu way of life and the interests of Hindus throughout the world. The RSS is a controversial organization which was banned thrice in India for its alleged involvement in events including the death of Mahatma Gandhi and the demolition of the Babri Masjid (Babri mosque) in Ayodhya, India. The RSS has been able to gain much political clout in recent times due to the rise of its member organizations (Sangh Parivar) which also includes the BJP.

Ayodhya²¹ and compared the Hindu politicians in RDB to Shiv Sainiks, members of the Shiv Sena,²² a political organization famous for its aggressive tactics and pro-Hindu ideology based in the state of Maharashtra. Bloggers also drew attention to the fact that nationalist ideologies had shifted the attention of the Indian State from issues concerning development to those concerning religion. Blogging thus helped provide people with information on various issues of public interest. This information in turn also helped motivate the people who watched RDB into becoming politically aware citizens. The political identity of people (specifically youngsters) in this case was shaped by viewing RDB. Therefore, I argue that the media consumption of RDB in this instance was directly tied to an increase in active citizenship.

Additionally, in order to promote the spirit of nationalism spurred by RDB, bloggers not only urged young people to go out and vote in the forthcoming elections but also advised people to read books and newspapers. It was through discussions like these that bloggers stimulated netizens into thinking about and also participating in political life. Furthermore, bloggers also helped create an interactive and participative environment by responding to the comments and the queries posted by readers on their blog sites. All this blogging on RDB culminated in the creation of a public space (aided by the Internet) in which argumentative debate and critical thinking was made possible on a number of current political issues. In fact as one astute blogger stated, “the fact that we are all discussing so much about this film [on blogs] and what message it conveys surely conveys that it has stirred up some emotion (good/bad) inside

²¹Godhra and Ayodhya in India have witnessed the worst communal riots between Hindu's and Muslims in post-independent India.

²²The Shiv Sena is a major political party in the Indian state of Maharashtra. The Shiv Sena is closely associated with the RSS and the BJP and is also constantly embroiled in controversies for allegations of party organized violence against Muslims as well as against proponents of western culture.

us. I now remain optimistic that some of this new found energy will be channeled towards nation building. Something India needs badly and fast.”²³

This above sentiment was echoed by many bloggers for whom RDB helped encourage public opinion and debate both on the Internet as well as in real life. It was in this context that a blogger discussing the impact of RDB wrote, “An interesting debate ensued after the movie when we were having tea late night on MG Road (Bangalore) we touched on various topics including Gandhi vs. Bhagat Singh”²⁴ Rensil D’Silva (who co-wrote the screenplay of RDB with Mehra) while commenting on the phenomenal response towards the film unknowingly seconded the opinion of many of his viewers when he said, “to be discussed by people in a caf means it (RDB) has struck a chord somewhere.”²⁵

It is precisely this kind of open deliberation/debate on the Internet (especially blogs and discussion boards) and in public life that helped RDB expand the public sphere because the very idea of rationally discussing and debating on important political, social and cultural issues is the foundation on which the Habermasian public sphere is based. Commercial entertainment in this case not only helped stimulate the public sphere but also increased political awareness and participation both on the Internet and in real life. Additionally, in this case, the active citizenship kindled by RDB resulted in bloggers calling attention to the lack of basic public services (like housing, health, sanitation, education etc) in India and demanding better facilities for the same from the government after being inspired by the characters from the film. The specific example of RDB indicates to us that audiences are highly reflexive

²³Shenoy, N. (2006, March 7) *Revving up a nation... or depicting futility of prodding a change?* Blog entry. Retrieved on April, 20th 2007, from <http://nakulshenoy.livejournal.com>

²⁴Sujai (2006, February 19) *Rang De Basanti*. Blog entry. Retrieved on April, 20th 2007, from <http://sujai blog.blogspot.com/2006/02/rang-de-basanti.html>

²⁵Chibber, N. (2006) *Vajpayee sings Rang De tune!* Retrieved April 14, 2006, from <http://www.rediff.com/movies/2006/feb/14rang.htm>

individuals who use media texts as a stepping stone to discuss issues of importance to them, which in this case was politics.

3.4.2 Social Responsibility

Bloggers who wrote on RDB used its theme and message to suggest ways by which people could change society. While some bloggers accomplished this through publicizing the work of NGOs (non governmental organizations), others did so by proposing strategies through which people could change the political and social system in India. One such citizen-blogger who rallied for a change in the present system of governance called upon the government to provide, “aggressive leadership” so as to motivate young people into joining politics. This type of change this blogger felt would not only infuse new blood into politics but would also help educate people to “give up the good life” and make the “system work”.²⁶ It is essential to keep in mind that discourse of this nature was directly inspired from RDB as the film exhorted youngsters to join politics to change the system. It was also in this context that a fellow blogger appealed to netizens asking them to do their best, “to make power accountable.” He asked that elected representatives be “questioned; through debates, discussions and awareness” and also hoped that RDB would teach would people to raise their voices and speak as a “collective whole”.²⁷

Additionally, bloggers also constantly quoted the central message of RDB, “there are two primary choices to life - to accept conditions as they exist or accept responsibility for changing them” while motivating people to become socially active.²⁸ This attitude of the socially-responsible citizen-blogger is best captured by a response

²⁶Bijapurkar, R. (2006) *The message of Rang De Basanti*. Blog entry. Retrieved on April, 20th 2007, from <http://www.ramabijapurkar.com>

²⁷Abhishek (2006, January 27) *Rang De Basanti*. Blog entry. Retrieved on April, 20th 2007, from <http://broadbandblog.in/453/rang-de-basanti/>

²⁸Direct quote from RDB

posted on the blog site of Chennai based journalist, Sudhish Kamat which said, “[o]ne thing that Rang De proves is that the freedom struggle must go on and every individual must take up that responsibility upon their shoulders. It is an emergency-wake up call for the youth in India to take the cause of freedom seriously.”²⁹

Responses and blogs of the above kind are indicative of the fact that the central message of RDB was imbibed by audiences who then used it to promote social thought and responsibility among netizens. Bloggers used the example of RDB to discuss a variety of personal, political and social issues and problems and it was this communication on issues of common interest and the desire to find solutions to common problems that built awareness among bloggers, increased public knowledge and mobilized them to make a difference. In one case, a blogger employed the message of RDB to discuss the ill effects of begging on Indian streets.³⁰ Drawing on the example of PRS³¹ this blogger urged netizens to volunteer their time in PRS while calling upon them to take on the responsibility for changing people’s lives in India. Furthermore, this blogger also reminded people that their “first and foremost duty” was towards the society and that they could give something back to society by helping PRS. Similarly, another blogger who was encouraged by the film stated that he would, “stop at traffic signals” and would no longer “drink and drive”. He also asked people who visited his blog to “pay taxes vote and to also spend a week during a year with a non government organization”³²

²⁹Kamat, S. (2006, February 3). *Long live the revolution*. Retrieved on April, 20th 2007, from http://sudhishkamath.blogspot.com/2006/02/review-rang-de-basanti_03.html

³⁰Anonymous blogger (2007, January 17) *Mera Khoon Chala: The Rang De Basanti effect*. Retrieved on April, 20th 2007, from <http://voxcredo.sulekha.com/blog/post/2007/01/mera-khoon-chala-the-rang-de-basanti-effect.htm>

³¹Palluruthy Relief Settlement (PRS) rehabilitates beggars and destitutes from streets in India. PRS is run by the Corporation of Cochin, a city in the Indian state of Kerala.

³²Comment retrieved from Kamat, S. (2006, February 3) *Long live the revolution*. Retrieved on April, 20th 2007, from <https://www.blogger.com/comment.g?blogID=8399912&postID=113982791378149169>

This particular blog post elicited 77 comments from readers who in their responses discuss the ways in which they would meet and discuss ways in which they could contribute to various social causes. From the above examples it is clear that bloggers directly capitalized on the message of RDB to promote social causes and change public life in India. It is keeping this initiative in mind that some bloggers championed the work of Kavita Gadgil (the woman whose campaign against “flying coffins”³³ was the inspiration behind RDB) as well as highlighted the death of her son Abhijeet Gadgil and the unfair criticism he received after his death. However, only a handful of bloggers criticized RDB and Rakyesh Mehra for using Gadgil’s death to make a commercial film without contributing any of the profits to the Abhijit Safety Foundation Trust.

The impact of RDB on popularizing and advancing social thought and responsibility is best summed up in the words of known journalist and popular Indian blogger, Sudhish Kamat who wrote in his blog that people need to, “[e]ncourage movies like RDB. Because even if they do not change you, they are probably making a few other people wake up to their responsibility towards the nation. And even going by the logic that they leave an impact that lasts just a month, there will be more movies that will come to help them keep the faith.” It is clear from an analysis of blogs on RDB that the consumption of RDB not only helped stimulate people into voicing their citizen-concerns on the public space of the Internet but also motivated and provoked them to think of the ways in which they could become socially conscious and politically informed citizens. Eventually, this change in political and social perception led to youth activism on a number of issues as newspaper reports of citizenship in India indicate. Additionally, this analysis of RDB on the Internet tells us that blogging not

³³Kavita Gadgil is the mother of Abhijeet Gadgil, the 26 year old Indian pilot who died in a MiG plane crash on 17th September 2001, due to faulty spare parts. Kavita Gadgil has since then set up the Abhijit Safety Foundation Trust to help build a memorial for Indian fighter pilots and soldiers at Pune, a city in the Indian state of Maharashtra.

only provided people with an outlet to voice their opinions but also gave those holding differing viewpoints the room to debate and engage in participative dialogue. This vibrant communication on the Internet as well as in real life (after watching the movie) was what helped expand the public sphere and promote participative democracy.

3.4.3 Youth activism

While RDB helped bolster political discussion and contributed to the creation of a socially-responsible netizen its impact was also strongly felt in public life as members of the public came together and organized themselves through communication platforms (like blogs) and shared social places (like the Internet) and venues (schools and colleges) in order to resolve issues of shared interest. In the months following the release of the film young people motivated by the message of RDB took to the streets and other public places to protest on public interest issues. However, the biggest, direct and most prominent impact of RDB was on the Jessica Lall and the Priyadarshini Mattoo murder case as RDB egged youngsters into highlighting the judicial injustice meted out in the above cases.

The Jessica Lall murder case is one of India's most high-profile murder cases. Jessica Lall, a model was shot dead on the 29th of April 1999 at a socialite party in New Delhi in front of about three hundred of India's most prominent people. Initially, numerous witnesses named Manu Sharma, the son of an Indian minister as the person who shot Lall that night. However, in the seven long years following the case, shoddy prosecution and hostile witnesses forced the Delhi High Court to acquit Manu Sharma on the 21st of February 2006, exactly one month after the January 26th release of RDB. Manu Sharma's acquittal saw the launch of one of India's most rigorous public protests and media campaigns all of which demanded that he be re-arrested. This period witnessed numerous protest campaigns from youngsters (students) who took it upon themselves (with help from the media) to organize street demonstrations, launch

text message campaigns and start email petitions (addressed to the President of India and media channels like the New Delhi Television Limited) demanding that Jessica Lall get justice. These protests were covered and supported by all media channels across India who joined the students and celebrities in demanding that the Delhi High Court re-open and re-try the Jessica Lall case.³⁴ In addition to protesting in real life, Indian youngsters also used the power of the Internet to help educate the public about the case. Bloggers played a big role in this process by publicizing the injustice in the above cases on the Internet, organizing protest activities and last but not the least, convincing young people to participate in public life and in demonstrations and marches. Bloggers, who could not be a part of these protests blogged about the Jessica Lall case and provided information about what people, could do to help her cause. Many of these bloggers were inspired by RDB's message to make a difference and they prominently quoted RDB's message in their posts.

This mood to secure justice and bring about a change also instigated student protestors into holding a candlelight rally at India Gate (inspired directly from a scene in RDB where students organize a candlelight rally at India Gate to protest the death of Ajay) where students took the mike to talk about the judicial process, corruption in the government and other issues. Students also organized a signature campaign at the end of the rally. A newspaper article while describing the student protests that day stated, "a curious undercurrent of theatricality underlaid the entire evening. Several people who took the mike that day referred to *Rang De Basanti*: at times it seemed more than the injustice itself, the film was their inspiration. It had not just intuited a latent public mood, in a curious twist, it had become the mood itself".³⁵ Thus in this instance one can reiterate the argument made by Canclini that

³⁴Chakravorty, V. (2006) *A lot of rage, a bit of Rang De!* Retrieved on April, 14th 2006, from www.hindustantimes.com

³⁵What this particular newspaper article describes as theatricality refers to the staging of the candlelight protest in the exact same manner as depicted in RDB. Although the candlelight protest

consumption of media images can not only affect and influence people's perception of citizenship but can also have an impact on their actions as citizens.



Figure 3.1. Candlelight protest for Jessica Lall at India gate inspired from RDB

In the picture: (from left to right) Sabrina Lall (sister of Jessica Lall) and other protestors. Singh, R. (2006) Protest images from the Jessica Lall case. Retrieved on August, 15th 2007, from www.outlookindia.com

The agitations, public protests and campaigns from students and others was not in vain as it led to the Delhi High Court admitting an appeal by the police against the Jessica Lall murder acquittal on the 25th of March 2006, one month after Manu Sharma had been set free. Finally, on the 15th of December 2006 (after a year of sustained activism) the Delhi High court declared Manu Sharma guilty of murdering Lall.

was inspired from RDB, it was the news channels and not the protestors who portrayed the event in the same manner as depicted in RDB. This article later goes on to describe the manner in which RDB inspired young middle class audiences into political activism. Chaudhury, S. (2006) *Sleeping Idealists?* Retrieved on April 14th, 2006, from www.tehelka.com



Figure 3.2. Student activists marching for justice in the Jessica Lall case

In the picture well known Bollywood actor and activist, Nafisa Ali marches with students for Jessica Lall. Moorthy, R.V. (2006) Protest images from the Jessica Lall case .Retrieved on August, 15th 2007, from www.thehindu.com

After the announcement of the verdict, friends and family of Jessica Lall thanked the students and the media for their support as without it Manu Sharma would have never been convicted. Additionally, the judgment against Manu Sharma was also momentous for students and other activist groups in India as it illustrated the power of public opinion and strength of public protests. Moreover, the Lall case also indicated to people that they could make a difference in society if they joined together to fight for a common cause. Thus, “the fire that was ignited in people” (quote from the film) after watching RDB culminated in awakening middle class India. The sentiment of RDB inspiring the Indian youth was espoused by bloggers who wrote, “[t]o wake up a

nation like us or should I say to wake up people like us we need a ‘DANDA’³⁶ . It can be some resisting force or some personal loss (as in the movie) and only then we can stretch out limits to ‘Awaken A New Generation’ Clearly it is [RDB] a message and not a movie. Its makes an appeal to ‘US THE YOUTH OF INDIA’ to understand today’s requirement for the betterment of our nation and act upon it”.³⁷ Thus, as it is clear from the above post bloggers looked upon RDB as more than a film and this opinion was strengthened when the news media reported the film as sparking a “revolutionary fever” in India.³⁸ In this context, it would not be wrong to argue that from a public sphere perspective, RDB created and sustained a citizenry that willingly took part in public life and it was in this process that it helped enrich the democratic process in India.

Another high profile murder that public activism (inspired by the success of the Jessica Lall case and enkindled by RDB) helped bring into spotlight was that of Priyadarshini Mattoo. Priyadarshini, a 22 year old law student was raped and murdered in her New Delhi home during the January of 1996. However, Santosh Kumar Singh, the son of a Police Inspector-General and the main accused in the case had been acquitted by a trial court in 1999 due to lack of evidence (and allegedly due to high profile connections in the government). However, this case also got a new lease of life in 2006 due to wide spread media attention, peace rallies (there was also a candle-light rally for Mattoo at India gate) and public protests from students in India, US and across the world, in the months following the release of RDB.³⁹ Following

³⁶Danda refers to stick in Hindi.

³⁷News Desk (2006) *Rang De Basanti readers respond*. Retrieved on April, 15th 2007, from <http://in.rediff.com/movies/2006/jan/31readers.htm>

³⁸Roy, S. (2006) *Film Sparks Revolutionary Fever in India* Retrieved on April, 15th 2007, from news.pacificnews.org

³⁹For more information watch the video clip on New Delhi Television Limited at <http://www.ndtv.com/convergence/ndtv/videos.aspx?id=4978>

the precedent set in Jessica Lall case, the Delhi High Court admitted the appeal by the Central Bureau of Investigation (India) to re-try the Mattoo case. After nearly 10 years of delay, the High Court finally decided to speed up the court hearings in light of the public outcry over delayed justice.



Figure 3.3. Protest images from the Mattoo case

In the picture, (from left to right) Bollywood actor, Anupam Kher along with other activists. Protest images from the Mattoo case (2006) Retrieved on August, 15th 2007, from www.thehindu.com

On the 17th of October 2006, the Court declared the main accused, Santosh Kumar, guilty and sentenced him to death. This judgment was pronounced just a few months before the landmark verdict of the Jessica Lall case. Both these cases stand as a testimony to illustrate the strength of public opinion and student activism in India. Looking at the examples of these two cases, I argue that the citizenship brought forth by RDB helped shape public policy. Public outcry over delayed justice

also resulted in a call for judicial reform in India so that cases in courts could be dispensed within months and not years. Media consumption of a commercial film in this instance helped transform people into politically active and socially responsible citizens. RDB thus had the effect of turning disparate audiences into members of a vibrant civil society desiring to change the political system.



Figure 3.4. Protest images from the Mattoo case

Protest images from the Mattoo case (2006) Retrieved on August, 15th 2007, from www.outlookindia.com

In other important instances, RDB was also much referred to during the students agitation against reservation⁴⁰ (in education institutions) as students potentially affected by the onset of reservation (especially doctors and engineers) took inspiration

⁴⁰Reservation in India refers to a government policy where a certain percentage of seats are reserved in the Parliament, State Legislative Assemblies, Central and State Civil Services, Public Sector Units, Central and State Governmental Departments and in all Public and Private Educational Institutions, except in the Minority and Religious Educational Institutions, for the socially and educationally backward classes and for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes who have traditionally been inadequately represented in these services and institutions.

from RDB to organize peaceful rallies and demonstrations. However protests in many instances turned violent as students accused law enforcement officers of using force on peaceful protestors. This unfair treatment meted out to the protesting students resulted not only in increased media attention for the cause of reservation but also ended in bloggers and students claiming that their treatment at the hands of the Indian police was similar to the violent treatment meted out to the protesting students in RDB.



Figure 3.5. Images of police violence against students protesting against reservation was compared to a similar scene in RDB

*Students protesting against the reservation (2006) Retrieved on August, 15th 2007,
from www.funonthenet.com*

Furthermore, the unfair treatment doled out to the protesting students and its resultant coverage in the media not only increased student resentment against the State but also induced more and more youngsters to join the battalions of youngsters already protesting on the streets. The mood of the hour was captured by a blogger who wrote, “ i see guys and girls my own age getting lathi charged and im thinking... i oughta join them they cant do this to us! okie, so I didnt exactly go man the front

lines after that daybut it had stirred me enough to go to one of the protest rallies in support of the FIGHT AGAINST RESERVATION” .⁴¹



Figure 3.6. Images of medical students protesting against the reservation policy of the Indian government

Students protesting against the reservation (2006) Retrieved on August, 15th 2007, from www.funonthenet.com

This sort of youth activism from citizens and citizen-bloggers inspired by RDB had a huge impact on the social fabric of the Indian society especially in terms of an increase in political activism and participation in public life. Additionally, keeping in mind Canclini’s argument that globalization and the disintegration of cities has in many instances led to the abandonment of public spaces as sites of collective participation and citizenship; I argue that in the case of RDB consumption of media

⁴¹Anonymous blogger (2006, September 7) *The Rang De Basanti Effect* Blog entry. Retrieved on April, 20th 2007, from <http://jinchuuriki.blogspot.com/2006/09/rang-de-basanti-effect.html>

images resulted in citizens using public places as sites of collective participation. This sort of activism by everyday citizens not only brought forth political participation but also helped in the creation of a socially responsible netizen. Thus, citizenship in this case was not only exercised on the Internet but also in real life. Additionally, RDB not only inspired audience members into forming interest groups (to lobby officials) and starting national/local petition campaigns but also forced them to change their personal habits in the quest to change the system. It was a combination of all these factors that caused an expansion of the public sphere in India. Furthermore, it was because of factors like these that a newspaper in India declared that RDB had become a part of “public consciousness”.⁴² All this attention to a commercial film may seem rather bizarre but as a student protesting against the reservation system put it, “we look up to Bhagat Singh, and to movies like Rang de Basanti This is just a small way of repaying our debt to our country.”⁴³ In sum, the Indian youth for who RDB was made thus felt that the film was “a trendsetter” as it was “a reflection of the power of the youth going to sweep the nation”⁴⁴.

To briefly summarize, this chapter examined blogs/discussion boards and newspapers to investigate the link between the media consumption of RDB and the resultant increase in citizenship. Through my study, I conclude that images from RDB (although mediated by the market) not only touched audiences but also encouraged them to form communities, discuss the film and finally moved them to act on various social issues. It is because of the above reasons that RDB helped Indian audiences understand their rights and duties as citizens and also brought about an increase in political participation. In addition, I also deem that viewing RDB resulted in an

⁴²News Desk (2006) *New-Age Nationalism*. Retrieved on April, 15th 2007, from www.timesnow.tv

⁴³Pereira. L (2006) *A lot of rage, a little Rang De*. Retrieved on April, 15th 2007, from <http://specials.rediff.com/news/2006/may/26sld1.htm>

⁴⁴Blog comment retrieved from Bansal, R. (2006, January 26) *Five stars to Rang De Basanti!* Blog entry. Retrieved on May, 3d 2007, from <http://youthcurry.blogspot.com/>

expansion of the public sphere on the Internet as netizens took advantage of new media technologies like blogs and discussion boards to interact in new ways with each other while employing reason and argument to debate and critically engage with each other on various social and political issues. I use the terms reason and argument specifically (in this context) because bloggers did not discuss politics in an emotional manner (although there is a heavy use of emotion in the film) but instead relied on facts, historical examples and political manifestos to convince fellow bloggers and Internet users of their political stances to inspire them into becoming politically aware.

This novel exercise of citizenship, prominently visible on the Internet also provided Indian youngsters with the opportunity to publicly affirm their status as citizens. Additionally, blogging also provided a means for individuals to reason, debate and participate in public life while also expanding the public sphere. It is also to keep in mind that audiences successfully contrasted their own rational (i.e. unemotional) and democratic political engagement with the violent, irrational and undemocratic ending of RDB,⁴⁵ therefore making a conscious effort to distance themselves from the solution offered by Mehra in the final part of RDB which they felt was not reflective of their own personal politics.⁴⁶

While the ending of RDB might have been unacceptable to audiences it cannot be denied that the film in its entirety was much appreciated by viewers for being realistic, true to life and politically inspiring. Media consumption of RDB and its emotional connection with audiences not only spurred the subsequent discussion and debates about it and increased the civic awareness among youngsters but also aided in the formation of a socially responsible and politically conscious citizen who willing

⁴⁵As evidenced by my study of blogs and newspaper articles on RDB.

⁴⁶RDB did not inspire any real life imitators. In fact Mehra was widely condemned in the press for endorsing violence in his film. Although, young audiences did not agree with the politics of the film's ending and widely condemned it in their blogs for being formulaic and filmic, they nevertheless found the film inspiring and true to life.

to take part in public life. Mehra's film as a specific case study thus helps us get a new perspective of the relationship between entertainment, citizenship and the public sphere. The example of RDB now tells us that commercial media and entertainment can in certain instances help turn passive individuals into reflexive citizens.

Keeping in mind the nature of audience response towards RDB and the positive reactions towards other recent popular 'neo-real' films from Bollywood like *Yuva* (2004) and *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* (2006) and *Chak De India* (2007), I suspect that political activism and social responsibility brought about by specific media texts will continue to increase. This argument gains strength when one reads the comments of audiences who watched RDB. Responses like, "[h]ow I wish that the message from the film would remain with us forever"⁴⁷ and "[a]fter I have walked out of the theatre the message still lingers disturbingly pricking my conscience"⁴⁸

The importance of messages like these can only be evaluated in light of the fact that the fight for Jessica Lal and Priyadarshini Mattoo case came many months after the release of RDB. Additionally, activism on the Internet especially on blogs and discussion boards continued to take place even twelve months after the release of the film. The official website of RDB reports that the film's impact was felt through out India and that it was also visible in the recent protests that took place in the Indian city of Varanasi in the wake of the bomb blasts that occurred there during March 2006.

In addition to the above cases, the spirit of the RDB was also experienced in the candlelight march for Meher Bhargava in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India during March 2006. Bhargava was killed for intervening when four thugs tried to molest her daughter-in-law in public. The thugs were reportedly being shielded by politicians.

⁴⁷Blog comment retrieved from Bansal, R. (2006, January 26) *Five stars to Rang De Basanti!* Blog entry. Retrieved on May, 3d 2007, from <http://youthcurry.blogspot.com/>

⁴⁸Blog comment retrieved from Bansal, R. (2006, January 26) *Five stars to Rang De Basanti!* Blog entry. Retrieved on May, 3d 2007, from <http://youthcurry.blogspot.com/>

The public protests and activism witnessed during this case are also being attributed to the fighting spirit inspired by RDB. In addition, the Indian media also now commonly uses the terms, 'RDB' and the 'RDB effect' to popularly refer to the awakening of the middle class in India or to refer to instances of public activism especially on matters of social interest.

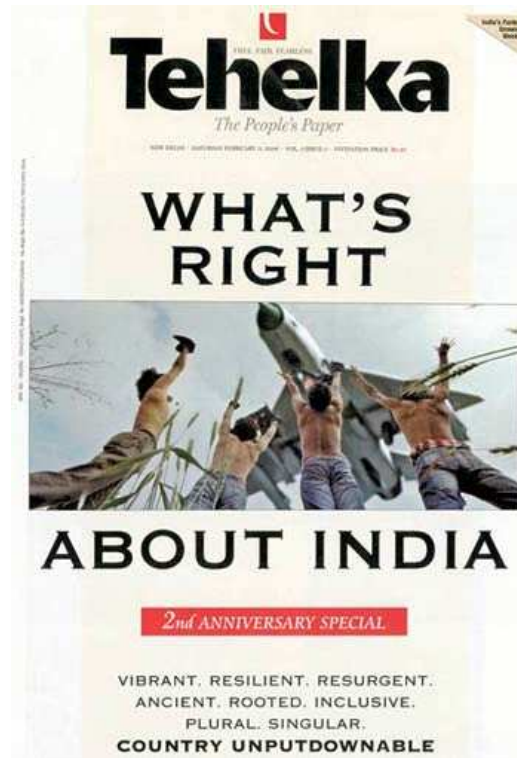


Figure 3.7. Indian news magazine, 'Tehelka', used the image of RDB on the cover of their special anniversary edition

*RDB in Tehelka (2006) Retrieved on August, 15th 2007, from
www.rangdebasanti.net*

This continued interest in RDB and its message is only indicative of the fact that it has had tremendous impact on Indian audiences. This argument also gains strength when one keeps in mind that Bollywood has always played a big role in the lives of film-crazy Indian audiences. Therefore, in 2007 it is not surprising to see this impact

making its presence felt in the political arena at least in India. The unique example of RDB tells us that commercial entertainment can today help promote political engagement and social responsibility.



Figure 3.8. Business and Economy referred to the defining moments of RDB in an editorial addressed to the prime minister asking him to “awaken” the nation

*RDB in Business and Economy Retrieved on August, 15th 2007, from
www.rangdebasanti.net*

While some critics find this type of politics emotional and not rational, I contend otherwise. For although, Mehra relies on emotions to connect with his viewers, audience response to RDB on blogs is indicative of the fact that argument, debate and critical thinking played an important role in turning the viewers of RDB into politically active citizens. Furthermore, it was this socially responsible citizen who went on to influence the public space in India. Keeping the unique example of RDB in mind, I

now conclude that commercial entertainment can not only promote argument, debate and citizenship but also extend the realms of the public sphere.

had a huge influence on the Indian economy and the performance of the advertising and film industries.

During the first half of the previous century economic growth was largely dependent on conquest and western countries grew prosperous through acquiring lands and resources from countries in Asia and Africa. However, after the Second World War this began to change as countries like India which had once been subject to western rule slowly began to gain independence from their colonial masters. Up until this period, national borders had defined the majority of trade as transportation and communication facilities were only still developing and newly formed nation states were looking to expand domestic markets as their first priority. Moreover, in this post-war scenario with trade barriers in place and economic uncertainty looming large, trade between newly independent countries was much restricted and India was no exception to this rule. However, things began to slowly change in India with the advent of globalization and the opening up of the trade market. Today, the Indian economy is no longer just dependent on domestic trade but is also greatly affected by international trade and relations.

Globalization with specific reference to India not only helped better the economy by increasing the availability of goods and services within the Indian subcontinent but also provided the Indian consumer with more choice. In addition, the increase in the production, distribution and consumption of goods and services also spurred the development of the Indian advertising and marketing industries, both of which played a crucial role in the success of RDB. It is for this reason that it becomes imperative to discuss the history of globalization and the coming of liberalization in India before moving on to analyze the political economy of RDB and the relationship between its marketing strategies and economic success. Last but not least, a brief discussion of

liberalization will also provide the social context and background to comprehend the nexus between the advertising and film industry in India, both of which have hugely benefited from the globalization that took place in the 1990s.

3.5 Globalization: A brief history

World War II had just ravaged the economies of most countries in the world and the world's industrial superpowers during this time saw the *raison d'être* behind creating a common agreement to protect and bolster trade between nations so as to improve their economies. This was the manner in which the Bretton Woods agreement came into being during 1945.⁴⁹ This agreement also saw the setting up of other institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB) and the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT) to help assist in the economic reconstruction of countries. The (GATT), set up in 1947 was a multi-country treaty that called for the liberalization of trade between all countries. In this post World War II period and cold war scenario the capitalist mode of production as endorsed by Western superpowers was also gaining prominence in comparison to the communist ideology of the USSR.

It was during this very period in 1947 that India broke away from her colonial shackles and gained freedom from the British. After independence, India was encouraged to follow the capitalist mode of production to development and the modernization paradigm which endorsed education and the building of infrastructure in the key sectors like electronics, communications and information technology was seen as the basis for strong economic growth. This ideology led the Indian government to borrow

⁴⁹The Bretton Woods agreement came about at the end of the second World War and was the first attempt made by the governments of the US, UK and France to design a new economic order. The Bretton Woods agreement took shape under the aegis of the United Nations which helped the above three countries in their quest to create a stable environment by which all global economies could recover and re-establish themselves from the damage caused by the World War II.

heavily from private banks and the World Bank during the 1970s while they were promoting the swift industrialization of their economy. However, a small recession in the western world coupled with the hike in the oil prices (during this period) spiraled into a major debt crisis for India as the Indian government could not repay its loans due to rising interest payments and the fall in exports.

It was in this scenario that the World Bank and the IMF stepped in and helped end this crisis through the loaning of funds to India. Additionally, it was also during this time that the IMF and World Bank gained legitimacy as institutional actors who could dictate monetary and economic policies to the countries they loaned finances to. These loans made borrowing countries like India subject to the economic and monetary restrictions put forth by the IMF who primarily desired that the developing countries repay their loans on time. Furthermore, these international organizations also stipulated the terms on which developing countries could trade.

One of the conditions put forth by the IMF and World Bank during this period necessitated borrowing countries to open up their domestic markets to international trade. It was this pressure that caused the Indian government to open up the domestic market and usher in the era of liberalization in the country. Additionally, the new liberalization policies also called for the deregulation and privatization of industrial sectors which until now had been run as government monopolies. Thus, the coming of liberalization during the 1990s in India not only helped international trade flourish but also aided in the rapid growth of technology, transportation and communication while bringing with it the much publicized era of globalization.

3.6 Globalization and India

Globalization in India was a direct fall-out of the change in the economic policy brought about by the Congress party in 1990 under the aegis of the Prime Minister,

Narasimha Rao and the Finance Minister, Manmohan Singh⁵⁰ due to the stipulations imposed by the World Bank and IMF. Economic reforms not only saw the privatization and liberalization of the public sector but also paved the way for foreign investment in India and the entry of multinational corporations like Coca Cola and Microsoft. In addition, this period also witnessed the dawn of satellite television and other communication networks in the country. Satellite Television (CNN to be specific) arrived in India during the Gulf War crisis of 1991, when war news from Baghdad was being transmitted by CNN to all parts of the world and some hotels and homes in India having access to a dish antennae were able to access this transmission.

After the Gulf War, Rupert Murdoch's STAR TV set foot in India when it began to broadcast all over Asia from its base in Hong Kong. Soon the BBC and MTV and other global channels followed suit. Satellite TV in India began with four to five channels global channels broadcasting old and new programs (predominantly soaps like *Dynasty*, *The Bold and the Beautiful* etc) from the US. Initially, very few homes in India could access satellite TV but by the year 1995, "8.5 million urban homes and 3.4 million rural homes had cable television in India." (Kumar, S. 200, pp.6) Satellite television and foreign programming content not only facilitated middle class Indians into getting an insight into life outside of India but also helped in increasing the consumption of goods in India which in turn spurred the economic growth in the country. Shanti Kumar reports that according to the Lintas advertising agency's market report of 1996, commercial revenue in India rose significantly after the introduction of satellite television during the early 1990s. (Kumar, S. 2006, pp. 46) This period also saw the development of the advertising and marketing industries in India as middle class Indians with disposable incomes were now given the opportunity to spend their money on luxuries previously unavailable to them. Furthermore, the

⁵⁰Manmohan Singh is the current Prime Minister of India and belongs to the Congress Party.

advertising industry in India profited greatly from the liberalization policy advocated by the government as more and more companies took the assistance of advertising to new consumers. Additionally, it is important to keep in mind that during this period Doordarshan, the state sponsored television channel of India was entrusted with the responsibility of creating a middle class “national family”, one that consumed both commercial programming and goods and services. (Kumar, S. 2000, pp.41)

It was this new atmosphere of liberalization and globalization that helped advertising come into its own in India for although Indian advertising was functional even during the 1950s it was not until the advent of television (in the 1970-80s) and the coming of liberalization (in the early 1990s) that it achieved much commercial success. Today in 2007, nearly two decades after the coming of liberalization in India, advertising is now considered the best way for organizations to reach out to potential consumers be it through print, television, radio, or the more recent of all, in-film advertising. Advertising, particularly in films has gained much popularity since the arrival of international brands and this has not only been an upshot of the opening up of the Indian economy and the current revolution in information technology but also a result of the influx of western cultural imports all of which endorse the ideas of increased consumption.

Additionally, revenue from marketing and advertising in India also touched new highs due to the increasing growth rate of GDP (Gross Domestic Product) in the years following liberalization. The growth rate of GDP of a country is always a good indicator of the health of its economy. India in recent decades has witnessed a very high growth rate as far as its economy is concerned and this has had a positive effect on all its industries. In the year 2006, the annual growth rate of GDP in India touched an astounding 9.2%. It is valuable to know this GDP rate because it is indicative of the fact that the prospects for urban middle class audiences are fast improving in India. Furthermore, strong market opportunities and lower interest rates since the mid 1990s

have greatly benefited Indian consumers who can now afford to splurge on luxuries and not just the essentials. Additionally, keeping in mind that the majority of the Indian population is under the age of 25, advertisers and marketers are increasingly desirous of attracting this age group and therefore use innovative methods to convince this audience to consume more and more.

It is in this process that Indian advertisers are taking the help of the Indian film industry whose larger than life medium provides advertisers with the opportunity to reach out to large and specific groups of audiences at one time and place and without the usual distractions of the other mass media. Common branding strategies for advertisers who use film advertising include product placements, celebrity endorsements before and after launch of a film, launch of products based on the theme of the film and co-branding strategies. Film advertising is popular with advertisers as it offers them the opportunity to portray their products and services as a part of the lifestyle/consumer culture depicted both in and outside of the film. In the case of the Indian market, with the everyday realism of Hindi films (during the 1940s and 50s) being increasingly replaced by lavish consumer lifestyles, imported cars and palatial houses (of the 1990s) Indian advertisers are now in a position to use film advertising to reach out to consumers and without much effort. Advertisers have also been helped by the fact that Indian filmmakers have turned extremely brand conscious since the 1990s and usually depict their actors enjoying extremely brand conscious and consumerist lifestyles. As Varma (2004) argues, “Indian identity is a composite duality of western and domestic product consumption. Urban India brushes its teeth with Colgate or Pepsodent; drinks Coca-Cola, Pepsi or Thums Up” and this is the lifestyle that is highlighted in the movies and it is this lifestyle that advertisers latch onto in order to sell their products. (Ibid, pp.160-161)

Hindi films as it now becomes clear provide advertisers with the perfect opportunity to showcase their products and brands. Advantages of advertising in films

according to a news report from the Indian advertising industry include endorsement from movie stars at a fraction of their cost and a clutter free viewing environment. Furthermore, advertisers are now opening up towards film advertising as movies target specific viewing audiences and offer advertisers additional opportunities for cross promotions. It is for this reason that advertisers are seamlessly integrating products and brands into a films storyline. According to an industry news report, the elements that Indian advertisers take into consideration before formalizing the tie-up between a brand and a film include the, “cast and credit; size of the project and the producers; timing of the release; brand impact; number of screens during release and post-release phase; and possibilities of brand associations through contests and promotions”.⁵¹ After the above elements have been taken into consideration, advertisers usually approach brands that are most favorable to the storyline and the theme of the movie and also design a 360 degree marketing plan for additional cross-promotions during various stages of the film’s release.

While it is easy to understand why advertisers find films to be an attractive medium to reach out to new consumers it is also essential to comprehend why Indian filmmakers are increasingly open to letting advertisers use their creative medium to reach out to audiences. For this reason it becomes imperative to understand the political economy of Hindi cinema. The political economy of national cinema needs to be kept in mind for the cinemas today revolve around making profits. Indian cinema is tied to the nation state because it is a private industry that depends on the state for the production, distribution and exhibition of its products. The state can therefore boost the film industry through measures like government subsidy, taxation, sponsorship, censorship and licensing etc. The Indian film industry is therefore invariably dependent on the state for its economic well being. Although the Indian film industry

⁵¹News Desk (2003) *Leo entertainment capitalizes on film placements*. Retrieved on April, 15th 2007, from www.indiantelevision.com

is a part of the private sector in the wake of liberalization, the state still plays an important role in its survival. According to Industry sources, the Indian film industry produced 1041 films in 2005 and raked in profits of 575 million USD in the year 2005. (CII/KPMG, 2006) Moreover, Indian films until the year 2001 were solely financed by private distributors, money lenders and studio houses as banks and other public sector institutions were banned from lending money to producers. This aspect made the film industry susceptible to accepting funds from the underworld and the black market for its production.

However, this ban was lifted in the year 2001, when film was accorded the status of an industry by the Indian government. This corporatization of Bollywood has also led to the emergence of the studio system with Hindi film producers now venturing into “film distribution and music production; film exhibitors such as Imax and Adlabs moving into production; and music companies and television-software makers such as UTV making films (they produced Rang de Basanti).” Additionally as a newspaper report indicates, “.producers are now hiring whole teams of writers, directors and technicians, and in-house studios and production facilities” to create a “one-stop shop” for filmmaking. In this process, “market surveys, research and payments by cheques” are becoming common in a rapidly changing industry.⁵² The major sources of revenues for the Indian film’s are, “domestic theatrical sales, i.e. exhibition (2001: 36 billion rupees); overseas rights (2001: 5.25 billion rupees); music rights (2001: 1.5 billion rupees); television and video rights (2001: 2 billion rupees); corporate sponsorship and merchandising (2001: 0.01 billion rupees). The total revenues of the industry from these sources are estimated at 45 billion rupees”.⁵³ Additionally, India also has the highest entertainment tax in the world with “36 billion rupees (being)

⁵²Corporatization is still in infancy and only an estimated 15% of Bollywood movies are corporatized. However, new production houses like UTV have brought about professionalism in Bollywood.

⁵³For a discussion of the FCCI report on the Indian film industry check the website: <http://www.ukfilmcouncil.org.uk/filmindustry/india/>

generated in 2001 through domestic theatrical sales equat(ing) to 72 billion rupees before taxes”⁵⁴ However, today the major issues plaguing the film industry are the lack of finance, increased taxation and movie piracy. What all of the above translate into is a big dent in a film’s profit margins and it is because of this that Bollywood is now dependent on advertising, product promotions, tie-ins and other such marketing strategies to break even and meet its production costs.

3.7 The market economics of RDB

Given all this background on advertising and film in India, I now seek to examine the production and economics behind RDB by scrutinizing who produced it and also by examining its marketing and promotional activities which saw an unprecedented convergence between advertising and film industry of India. RDB raked in Rupees 44.8 million in revenues at the box office from ticket sales within the first 10 days of its worldwide release. The movie also grossed 300 million in India in the first thirteen weeks of its release. UTV (United Television), the company which produced RDB, spent US\$ 7 million (Rs 250 million) on its production out of which i.e. 40% of its production budget US \$2.5 (Rs 100 million), unlike the usual 5% of a typical Bollywood film on its marketing and promotions alone.⁵⁵ Keeping this aspect in mind, it comes as no surprise that UTV decided to go out of its way to tie-up with numerous brands to promote RDB. This aspect also makes it clear that RDB was expected to recover all of its production costs through advertising/promotions if not through

⁵⁴For a discussion of the FCCI report on the Indian Film Industry check the website: <http://www.ukfilmcouncil.org.uk/filmindustry/india/>

⁵⁵UTV, which was until much recently a television production company, has now started to finance and also release films. UTV along with other firms like Ad Labs not only works towards maximizing its economies of scale by distributing and financing its films but is also professionalizing its production. UTV has also been able to attract foreign direct Investment from Hollywood with respect to film distribution.

the sales of its tickets and music rights.⁵⁶ In order to recover its heavy production costs, UTV needed to create a unique brand image for RDB and also much before its release so that RDB could gain from endorsements and advertising revenues. It was this aspect in mind that probably influenced the marketing and communication strategy of RDB. The brand image of RDB was centered on its tagline which read, ‘a generation awakens’ and interestingly enough the entire marketing campaign of the movie was centered on this theme. Everything “from the use of the graffiti wall in the publicity designs reflecting youth, attitude and rebellion; to ensuring a seamless personality fit with the brands associated with the film”,⁵⁷ the marketing of RDB tried to stay true to the theme of the film.

RDB had also tied-up with various brands as a part of its marketing strategy and the most important of them all was with Coca Cola. I suspect the two factors that influenced and help seal this partnership were Prasoon Joshi and Aamir Khan. Prasoon Joshi, the creative head of McCann Erickson, the international advertising agency in South Asia wrote the dialogues and song lyrics for RDB. In addition, Prasoon Joshi was also the person who was in charge of the Coca Cola account for McCann Erickson (India). It is interesting to note that, it was Coca Cola who insisted McCann hire Prasoon to handle its account after seeing his previous work for the soft drink, Sprite.

The belief that Coca Cola had in Prasoon was well rewarded when Prasoon’s tagline for Coca Cola and the subsequent advertising campaign, “Thanda matlab Coca Cola” [Cool means Coca Cola] won the Golden Lion Award at Cannes in 2002. Furthermore, Prasoon’s, “paanch rupaiya” (Five rupees for a coke) advertisements starring Aamir Khan were a huge success as they increased sales and made Coca Cola

⁵⁶Pfanner. E. (2006) *India’s new cinema has a global script*. Retrieved on April, 15th 2007, from <http://www.iht.com/articles/2006/05/21/yourmoney/movies22.php>

⁵⁷News Desk (2006) *The Rang De Basanti marketing revolution*. Retrieved on April, 15th 2007, from www.indiantelevision.com

the talk of India. Keeping advertising industry reports in mind, I believe this to be one of the important reasons as to why Coca Cola chose to partner with RDB. Although, Coke was promoted in RDB, this aspect was not discussed in the popular press and it was because of this lack of information that Indian audiences were unaware of the brand tie-up between Coke and RDB. This is an important reason as to why RDB was perceived as a social and a nationalist film and not a commercial media product by its viewers.

The other reason I attribute to the brand marriage of Coke and RDB is Aamir Khan, who is not only the leading star of RDB but is also the current brand ambassador of Coca Cola in India, and has been for the previous six years. In this situation, it is easy to speculate whether Coca Cola had a hand in short-listing Aamir Khan to play the leading role in RDB. If Coca Cola had indeed influenced the selection of the cast of RDB then it would not be wrong to state that the equation between advertisers and Bollywood filmmakers has now touched a new high with advertisers dictating terms to filmmakers and not vice versa.

Additionally, in order to understand why Coca Cola partnered with RDB, it is necessary to comprehend the background of Coca Cola in India. Coca Cola has not had an easy time producing, distributing or marketing Coke in India and right from its very arrival in the country. Coca Cola got off to a bad start in India when it asked to leave in 1977, following the Indian government decision to oust all multinational companies from the subcontinent. Following its departure in 1977, Coca Cola returned to India only in 1993 when economic liberalization had begun to take place in the country. In recent years, Coca Cola has been in the news in India because its bottling units have been accused of depleting groundwater levels and damaging the environment in various Indian states. Moreover, the Delhi-based Centre for Science and Environment after a study of soft drinks in India has also declared that Coca Cola amongst other soft drinks contained high levels of pesticides. In Coca-Cola, the

pesticide amounts averaged at 0.0150 mg/l, 30 times higher than the European limit for the same. The effect of all this bad publicity has resulted in a sharp drop in Coca Cola sales, public protests and also negative brand image.



Figure 3.9. Aamir Khan endorsing Coca Cola and RDB

Coca Cola ties up with Rang De Basanti, introduces special edition bottles. Retrieved on August, 15th 2007, from www.indiantelevision.com

This negative brand image has necessitated Coca Cola to spend huge sums of money on improving its brand image and soothing the ruffled feathers of politicians in India through measures like environmental awareness, rainwater harvesting campaigns, land restoration projects and positive branding. All this bad publicity also made the company go on an advertising spree in India. Additionally, Coca Cola has also in recent times done its best to associate itself with projects that are nationalist/patriotic in nature so as to be viewed in a positive light by the Indian public. Keeping this background in mind, it is no surprise that Coca Cola decided to associate itself with RDB. The nationalist theme of RDB offered Coke the perfect opportunity to be perceived as an 'Indian' brand and this according to me is one of the biggest reasons why Coca Cola went out of its way to promote RDB.

This fact is perhaps best highlighted by the fact that that Coke launched, for the very first time in its marketing history, special edition bottles to commemorate the release of RDB. These special edition bottles were inspired by the spirit of RDB and packaged with a wrap around label featuring the key art of a film and five friends who accept responsibility while propagating the slogan of Coca Cola, ‘Piyo Sar Utha Ke’ (Drink with your head held high). This message also formed a part of the specially produced integrated marketing communication campaign involving television commercials, print advertisements and radio spots thereby seamlessly merging the Coca Cola, the brand and RDB, the movie. Other promotional activities undertaken by Coke included giving away free passes for RDB, co-branding the music CD’s and cassettes of RDB, Conducting contests to meet Aamir Khan and last but not-the-least the launching of RDB collectibles.⁵⁸

Other companies that tied-up with RDB included, ‘Provogue’ (the young fashion house) who launched a merchandise line inspired by the “tone, look and message of RDB”.⁵⁹ The company even organized a fashion show to show case the launch of the new line of apparel. All the stars of RDB also participated in this fashion show conducted by Provogue which also included performances from Daler Mehndi, the popular folk singer who sang the title track of RDB. This fashion show was also telecast live during primetime on ‘Zee television’, one of India’s most popular channels thereby cashing in on the popularity of RDB. In addition, Provogue also took out numerous full page print advertisements in various Indian cities in order to popularize their brand by co-branding it with RDB.

In addition, UTV also tied-up with the multinational giant ‘LG’ for the launch of the new LGX mobile phone, aimed at generation next in India. Not only did the phone

⁵⁸News Desk (2006) *The Rang De Basanti marketing revolution*. Retrieved on April, 15th 2007, from www.indiantelevision.com

⁵⁹News Release (2006) *Aamir Khan Launches Coca-Cola’s Rang De Basanti Special Edition Bottles*. Retrieved on May, 20th 2007, from www.coca-colaindia.com

contain wallpapers and screen savers from RDB but its handset was designed keeping RDB's theme in mind. This period also saw the launch of the RDB videogame for mobile phones which was all about five friends defeating corrupt politicians in India. This media campaign by LG was very successful and promoted nationwide in print and television. Additionally, LG's marketing strategy was clever because it induced Indian consumers to purchase the LG mobile as a part of their patriotic duty towards the country. The above is a reason why RDB's brand partnerships were perceived as social, patriotic and evaluated in a positive manner by the Indian public.

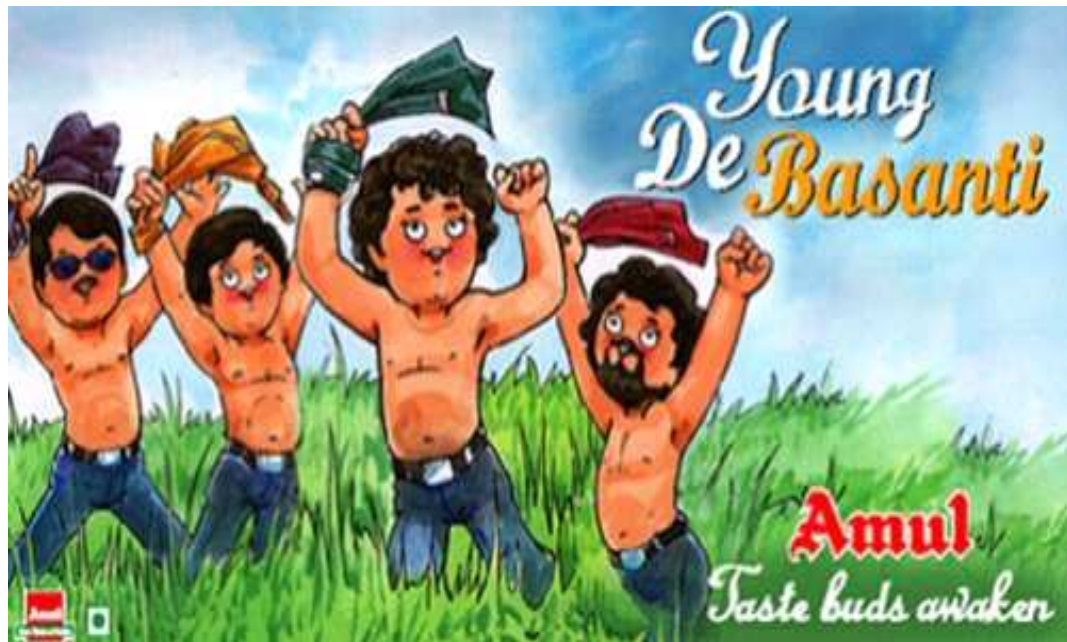


Figure 3.10. An example of a brand using RDB to sell its products to the public

Amul on RDB (2006) Retrieved on August, 15th 2007, from www.rangdebasanti.net

RDB also partnered with 'Airtel', one of India's leading mobile service providers for the 'Rang De Paathshaala tour' (Color me school tour). This campaign specifically targeted school/college students in India and in order to interact with the students the cast and the crew of RDB visited various schools and colleges in India. As a part

of this campaign, students were then told to express themselves on a wide range of issues affecting them as young citizens of the country. The slogan of this campaign was ‘Express Yourself’ which worked well for both Airtel and RDB as the theme of RDB was all about expressing one’s commitment to the nation.

This campaign by Airtel was covered by the popular news channel NDTV (New Delhi Television) and was aired on it a week before the RDB released in India. This partnership between RDB and Airtel was very profitable for both the parties as it took their campaign directly to schools and colleges and also prevented their partnership from being viewed from the commercial standpoint. It is important to keep in mind that although RDB had various brand-partnerships, the Indian public was at no point in time made to feel like the branding of RDB was done with profit in mind. Most brands successfully capitalized on the theme and message of RDB (i.e. patriotism and nationalism) to sell their products. This fact made it seem like RDB and all the brands associated with it were free from commercial aspirations.

Additionally, the various brands also induced consumers to buy their products as a mark of their allegiance and duty towards the country. It was for this reason that the much hyped about RDB failed to attract media and public attention for its various commercial partnerships. Other tie-ups of RDB included a multimedia campaign with ‘Berger Paints’ and ‘Club HP’ (Hindustan Petroleum]). Media partners of RDB included ‘Radio Mirchi’, ‘Channel [V]’ and MSN website. RDB in an exclusive tie-up with MSN “used the power of MSN blogs to generate hype around the movie”. In this unique tie-up, MSN set up blogs for all the six lead actors of RDB so as to enable the public to “chat and interact” with them on a regular basis. The premier of the movie was also “web-cast” on MSN on the 26th January, the day RDB released in the theatre.⁶⁰

⁶⁰News Desk (2006) *Rang De on Net*. Retrieved on March, 15th 2006, from www.thehindu.com

All the above marketing campaigns and promotional tie-ups of RDB clearly indicate that RDB was predominantly marketed towards the youth, with a specific focus on urban youngsters and that this fact also played a role in making youngsters feel that the movie was realistic/true to life because not only was RDB made specifically for this audience but also addressed the young viewers in a manner familiar to them. It is essential to remember that RDB was filmed keeping this particular audience in mind and was in fact scripted by Kamlesh Pandey, the scriptwriter after a focus group interview with 150 youngsters.⁶¹ Intensive research of this kind is highly uncommon for a Hindi film and Rakesh Mehra used the information from the focus group interviews in order to come up with the true to life story of RDB. The dialogues and songs of RDB with its college lingo, Punjabi (Punjabi and English) and Hinglish (Hindi and English) slang were written by Kamlesh Pandey. Everything in RDB from the use of hard rock as the background score to the choice of locations was done keeping in mind the Indian youth. It therefore came as no surprise when youngsters in India felt the movie was a youth film.

Rakesh Mehra along with the cast and crew also promoted the screening of RDB in a unique manner. RDB was screened at various places including, 'Infosys' (Hyderabad and Bangalore locations) the leading software company in India, boasting of a workforce predominantly in the age group of 23-35. The movie was also screened at IIT (Indian Institute of Technology, Chennai) the premium institute of technology in India having on its rolls the brightest minds in India. The director Rakesh Mehra also attended the screening of RDB in Ahmedabad, Gujarat which has seen some of the worst Hindu-Muslim riots in recent times. The promotion of RDB was therefore unprecedented. The special screenings of RDB were also always followed by a discussion which helped spark debates about its theme, the role of citizens while enabling

⁶¹Chibber, N. (2006) *Vajpayee sings Rang De tune!* Retrieved on April, 14th 2006, from <http://www.rediff.com/movies/2006/feb/14rang.htm>

rational discussions about the nation state, national identity and nationalism. This aspect also helped promote citizenship in India as youngsters moved by the realist images and the marketing strategies of RDB now felt encouraged take part in public life and debates and discussions about the movie.



Figure 3.11. RDB's tie-up with MSN

RDB and MSN (2006) Retrieved August, 15th 2007, from www.rangdebasanti.net

This unique marketing and distribution strategy of RDB ensured that the movie was not read as a run off the mill, commercial Hindi film but was instead viewed as a political and social film that critiqued the State and its bureaucracy. The ramifications of RDB were also felt far and wide in India. The former Prime Minister of

India, Atal Behari Vajpayee, was quoted as saying, 'Aag hai mujhmen kahi' (There is a fire somewhere within me) after watching the film.⁶²

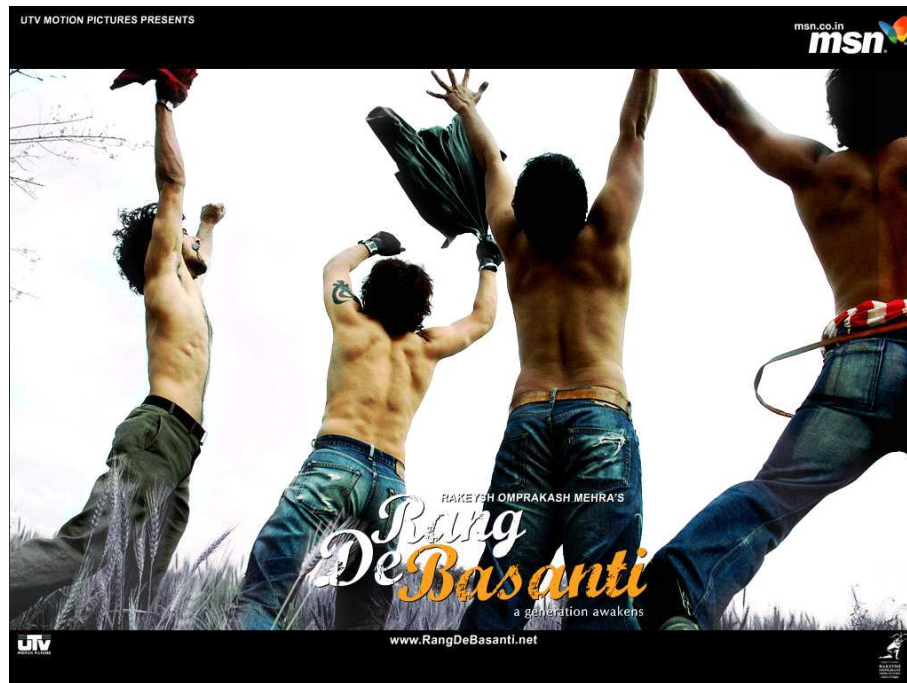


Figure 3.12. Youth oriented marketing of RDB

*Youth oriented marketing of RDB (2006) Retrieved on August, 15th 2007, from
www.rangdebasanti.net*

The audience reaction towards RDB is indicative of the fact that the movie was perceived as a social film despite all of its commercial partnerships. The media by not highlighting the brand partnerships of RDB also unknowingly aided this cause. Thus, it came as no surprise that RDB, one of the most hyped up commercial Hindi films of the 21st century was termed a realist film with a social message. Furthermore, the positive audience reaction to the film and the acts of citizenship witnessed in the

⁶²Chibber, N. (2006) *Vajpayee sings Rang De tune!* Retrieved on April, 14th 2006, from <http://www.rediff.com/movies/2006/feb/14rang.htm>

wake of RDB's release enhanced the film's aura and appeal and prevented audiences from viewing the film and its partnerships from a commercial angle. Additionally, the social/realist tag secured by RDB not only enabled it to gather social approval but also played a role in helping it become a commercial box office success.

This analysis of Bollywood's advertising and marketing trends should make it clear that the corporatization of the Indian film industry has resulted in the emergence of a new kind of filmmaking in Bollywood, one in which business interests and profits are of primary importance and override other concerns associated with filmmaking. This new kind of filmmaking has had an enormous influence on advertisers and marketers in India all of whom are now keen to use the power and reach of Bollywood to sell their products/services to a mass audience. Furthermore, advertisers prefer in-film advertising because cinema functions both as a product (conduit for advertisers) and a medium of entertainment. Moreover, since audiences do not find in-film advertising as interruptive as other forms of advertising, promotional messages tend to be easily and seamlessly integrated into the narrative format by filmmakers and advertisers. It is a combination of all the above factors that induce marketers to choose films as their marketing vehicles. This new strategy also works well for the corporatized Indian producer who uses the revenues from the advertising to break even and generate profits.

In 2007, it is not wrong to say that marketing communication strategies are becoming more and more common in Bollywood. RDB as a unique case study is therefore not only indicative of the changing consumer and corporate trends in Bollywood but is also reflective of the convergence between the advertising and film industries in India. Keeping in mind recent Bollywood releases, I suspect that marketing communication trends will become common place in India and strategic brand partnerships and product placements (more so in films that have a nationalist and patriotic theme) will be necessary to ensure the success of a commercial film.

CHAPTER 4

RDB AND REALISM

In this chapter, I showcase how the realism¹ in the narration (content) and style of RDB moved audiences and influenced like-minded youngsters to rationally discuss the movie and other aspects related to it on the Internet as well as in real life and set the ground for future acts of citizenship in India.² To begin with, the analysis of blogs and news articles on RDB in the first chapter reveals that a big part of the Indian audiences' connection with RDB and the characters was because of the fact that the film seemed "real" in relation to its narrative and style.³ This factor played a big part in helping RDB's story and message emotionally connect with Indian audiences. In this chapter, I therefore evaluate the specific techniques of narration and style in Mehra's film that enabled it to be perceived as realist, true to life and authentic by its audiences. However, before embarking on a textual analysis of RDB, I find it essential to not only historicize the relationship between film and reality but also briefly dwell on the history of realism in Hindi cinema (especially Bollywood). This

¹For the purpose of this thesis, I understand realism as the re-presentation of themes from the real world through the use of specific stylistic techniques. In this chapter, I argue that fictional films by re-presenting themes and making references to the real world help audiences connect with the events on screen and bond with the protagonists of a film. The aesthetics of realism in a film can evoke strong emotional responses from audiences and motivate them to act in certain ways because stronger reality appraisals result in more intense emotions.

²According to film theoretician David Bordwell, a film's form incorporates both narration (content) and style as the two elements are mutually intertwined. Bordwell argues that content and style cannot survive without each other as style is the backbone of narration. However for deconstructing and interpreting RDB, I will analyze narration and style separately although the two elements are not mutually exclusive.

³As evidenced by my study of blogs and newspaper articles on RDB.

framework will not only serve to guide this discussion but will also help in the formal deconstruction of RDB.

4.1 Realism and Cinema

Realism as an artistic movement originated in Europe and America during the 18th century. This movement developed in opposition to the neo-classical and romantic traditions in art which placed more emphasis on the idealized and personalized representation of objects than on capturing objective, natural and true to life phenomena. The origin of realist movement in visual art thus began with the quest to capture nature and other natural objects in a true-to-life manner both in painting and eventually in photography. It was also during this time that the realist movement came to be associated with “ideas of progressive politics” as it called for the inclusion and representation of all classes of people in its visual art as opposed to the elitism of the European art movement. (Kleinhans, C., Hess, J., and Lesage, J., 2007)Realism in art, as history indicates, was and is both an aesthetic and a political movement.

4.1.1 Aesthetics of realism in cinema

A discussion of the aesthetics of realism in cinema usually boils down to the question of whether cinema is a mirror image of the real world versus a representation of the themes in the real world. (Williams, 1980 pp.1) The above questions can be answered by diverging opinions on cinema and reality as propagated by two groups. In the first group, people who consider art (i.e. - cinema) to be about the real world, regard images as real. This notion is a carryover from the heydays of photography when the camera was seen as the best instrument to capture images of real life. These were the views endorsed by classical realists like Kracauer and Bazin for whom images in film resembled empirical reality. Bazin in fact perceived the photographic image as a “fingerprint of the object” itself. (Singer, 1998 pp. 44) This view of

Bazin would perhaps have been contested by Plato for whom all art (and in this context- the image) was an illusion (or a copy of the real thing) as the real could never be imitated or captured. The second group looks upon film as a medium that re-presents reality. Film in this case is not seen as a straight reproduction of reality but as a hybrid that combined various art forms in its re-presentation of themes of the real world. Formalists like Eisenstein, Arnheim and Balazs were proponents of this concept because they perceived film as having the technical capacity to transform the reality that it captured. Reality contend, for this paper cannot be captured and displayed as Bazin theorizes, for images can only try to duplicate objects at their very best. A similar argument is made by Singer when he states, “superlative works of art do present us with the absent world - but only in the sense that it has been given meaning through insightful representations of it.” (Singer, 1998 pp.50) Thus, Singer argues that cinema can only at its best re-present the real world but never replace it. From a formalist viewpoint, cinema re-presents themes from the real world by using specific stylistic techniques. In other words, a film’s technical aspects can serve to enhance the realism experienced by its audiences.

Keeping the above arguments in mind I contend that cinema can emphasize the realism of the everyday world through the aesthetic arrangement of its narrative and stylistic elements. However, in order to understand how the narrative and stylistic elements of a film enhance its realism it’s necessary to understand its various constituents. A film’s content usually refers to its narrative structure (which includes its plot and story) while style incorporates elements like mise en scene, cinematography, editing, and sound. Documentary films which are the best representative of the realist strand in filmmaking have in their quest to capture the objective truth distinguished themselves from fictional films both in terms of their narrative structure and style of filmmaking. While documentary films are well known for their lack of artifice in narration and style, audiences who watch documentaries may not necessarily be aware of

the staging-of-reality that takes place during the process of filmmaking. Often times, this re-creation confuses spectators about the veracity of the filmmaking process. The very intervention of a filmmaker in choosing a certain camera position or a particular lighting results in an inherent bias while capturing images. It is because of these reasons that the idea of an objective documentary becomes an oxymoron of sorts.

Fictional narrative films, in contrast to documentaries, arguably show spectators a world that may or may not be a representative of the real world. Although these films make references to the real world directly and indirectly, the open and polysemic nature of their content usually lets audiences make sense of their realness keeping their subjective experiences in mind. Additionally, fictional narrative films re-present and repackaging both the familiar and the unfamiliar in a way that helps people emotionally connect and relate to the filmic world as if they were real. Movies are because of this staging of reality able to “evoke emotional responses that may be stronger and deeper than [than the ones] we permit in the real world.” (Singer, 1998 pp. 23) While constructing referential images in cinema, filmmakers make it a point to re-present reality in a “stylistic package” as audiences demand a viewing experience that is both pleasurable and visually appealing. (William, 1980 pp.10) This quest to please audiences with realist content in stylish packaging led filmmakers in the US to develop ‘the classical Hollywood style’ (CHS)⁴ of cinema that employed specific narrative and stylistic techniques in order to convince audiences of the realism of its content.

However, in spite of this increased realism achieved through new techniques of style and content, a filmmaker cannot re-create a completely accurate and objective view of reality/real world. For even a photograph, which is argued by some to be an

⁴The classical Hollywood narrative is a term coined by film theorists David Bordwell, Kirsten Thompson and Janet Staiger from their formalist study of 100 Hollywood films from the period of 1917-1960. This style combines elements from the realist and formalist styles of cinema in order to tell stories inspired from the real world.

indexical representation of reality, has in some way been influenced by the subjectivity of the photographer who captured it. Even going with the idea that filmmakers can only re-create a subjective view of reality for audiences, they still have to ensure that the cinematic reality they present to audiences is depicted in an aesthetically pleasing and true to life manner because without the aesthetic realism of content and style even everyday life can seem rather bizarre on the big screen.⁵ It was keeping in mind the ability of filmmakers to re-create aesthetic reality on the big screen that the British board of film censors (founded in 1913) banned in its very first year, “too much realism in dealing with certain subjects like: realistic horrors in warfare, painful insistence of realism in deathbed scenes and realistic scenes of massacre and torture.”⁶

This act of the British Board of Film Censors is indicative of the fact that the debate on realism boils down to reality experienced on the level of the senses versus the reality of ideals as perceived by the mind. This point is echoed by Williams in his book, ‘Realism and Cinema’ where he states, “philosophically the debate about realism can perhaps best be grasped through the opposition between ‘mere appearances’ meaning the reality of things as we perceive them in daily life and experience, and ‘true reality’, meaning an essential truth, one which we cannot normally see or perceive, but which in Hegel’s phrase, is ‘born of the mind’.” (Williams, 1980 pp.11) This above issue indicates why it has been difficult for film scholars to reach a consensus on the issue of realism; for not only is it problematic to agree on what constitutes reality but it is also equally challenging to re-present/re-create reality in a manner that is acceptable to all audiences. Just as filmmakers use different techniques to familiarize audiences with conflicting perceptions of reality, audiences can also de-

⁵Aesthetic realism is the foundation on which cinema is based and enforces the idea that what looks realistic must also be real.

⁶Realism and censorship (pp.6) Retrieved on March, 25th 2006, from Film Education, UK. <http://www.filmeducation.org>.

pending on their social class, religion, personality and identity read realist film texts in their own unique ways.

It is precisely this practice of reading/re-presenting reality in different ways that has enabled the realist style to influence numerous cinema movements throughout the world. This includes Soviet cinema from the 1920s, the Italian neo-realism movement of the 1940s, the 1950s working-class films from England, the international efforts of cinema verite in the 1960s, the documentary movement of the 1980s,⁷ the dogme 95 films from Denmark along with the neo-realist films from India, Iran and South America. These various film movements stand as a testimonial to the fact that there can be no single style to depict realism in cinema. For example, a film can use the documentary style of filmmaking (from the documentary movement of the 1980s) to come across as realist or in other instances use non-professional actors, real life locations (techniques common to the Italian neo-realist cinema movement of the 1940s) and other stylistic means like continuity editing (from the classical Hollywood cinema style) in order to convince audiences about its authenticity. Given these various possibilities it is apparent that an archetype for a realist film does not and cannot exist. However, the fact that realism plays an important part in constructing a film's narration and style cannot be ignored either.

Today, the makers of realistic and other kinds of cinema want their films to be perceived as true-to-life. A good example of this trend can be seen in Indian popular films, well known for its excess and melodrama. Indian filmmakers who preferred to make unrealistic, fantastic and fantasy-like films are now striving to make their films realistic (in content and style) so that audiences through out the world can better

⁷During the 1980s many parts of the world saw a revival of the documentary film as a mainstream cultural form as documentaries began to be made for television, especially in the UK and the US. Since the 1980s most documentaries also began to be shot on video for a non-cinema audience and had an educative function in mind. This period triggered new forms of documentary programming like historical and art documentaries as well as docudramas which began to be screened on television.

relate to them. It is for this reason that aesthetic realism now plays a role in the commercial and critical success of popular cinema in India. In this next section, I will briefly trace the history of realism in Hindi cinema both in the popular and art films in order to comprehend the status afforded to realism in Hindi cinema. This section will therefore give readers the background to understand why the realism in the content and style of RDB helped Indian audiences relate to the film while ensuring its social and commercial success.

4.2 Realism and Cinema in India

Cinema came to India in the year 1896 and from the Silent era films of the late 1800's to the multi-starrer films of 2007, cinema has remained an integral part of the Indian community. The Indian film industry churns out about 1000 films a year and in 28 odd languages. These films can be broadly classified into three categories; commercial, art and all other cinema.⁸ The commercial or the masala film from Bollywood is the most popular and lucrative among the three categories. Cinema in India developed primarily in three cities of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras. These large cities later became the locus points around which the regional cinemas and studios developed. While Bombay and Madras became the hub of commercial/popular cinema for the north and the south, Calcutta due to its cultural and intellectual heritage served as the base for the development of art cinema in the Western part of India.

The first films in India were the silent films and their dominance lasted from 1912 to 1934. In this period the first genre to captivate audiences was the devotional and the mythological. These early films adapted from popular Indian plays and various religious texts mesmerized audiences until the beginning of the 1920s. After this

⁸Indian cinema is usually categorized into commercial and art cinema. All other kinds of cinema in India including documentaries, independent and experimental films fall into the 'other' category because there is no proper classification system in place.

period, the decade from the 1920-30s not only witnessed the arrival of new genres but also saw Indian filmmakers vying with each other to make films on various themes. In addition, it was during this period in the 1930's and 40s that Bombay and Hindi films began to dominate Indian Cinema.

4.2.1 Realism in Hindi popular cinema

Yves Thoraval in 'The Cinemas of India' discusses how popular cinema during the period of Indian Independence in 1947 and shortly thereafter helped propagate nationalism by breaking down linguistic and regional barriers of various India's numerous states. This phase also saw the arrival of films on social realism that had their origins in the socialist economy envisioned by the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru. Noted filmmakers from this period who produced cinematic works from an "artistic and humanist" point of view included Mehboob Khan, Guru Dutt, Bimal Roy and Raj Kapoor. (Thoraval, 2000, pp.51) Not only did the films of these directors have realist themes but they were also filmed in a realist manner. Aesthetic realism of style and technique was therefore not unusual for Hindi Cinema during this decade and although these films like their predecessors depended on melodrama, songs and dances to attract audiences their theme and style was reflective of social reality in India and India's transition from colonialism to urbanism.

However, the appeal of these realist films waned in the 1960s and '70s due to the advent of escapist and fantasy-based films, catering to the imagination of the "urban poor, the labor force, (and) the lumpen elements" of Indian society. (Thoraval, pp.49) These visually appealing but excessively sentimental and melodramatic films were perceived as films that would help entertain and unify the heterogeneous society that was the new urban India. The Hindi commercial films from this period endorsed a common set of culturally conservative values (like respect to tradition and culture) which had entertainment and storytelling as their primary motive. Thus, filmmakers

who had until the previous decades admirably sought to throw light on social issues now chose to make predictable and formulaic but commercially successful films that the Hindi film industry would later become famous for. This period also marked the golden age of Hindi cinema when cinema attained the status of a full-fledged art form. According to Indian film historians, up until the period of the 1960s the dividing line between popular and art cinema in India was minimal as both popular and art filmmakers made films that were socially relevant and realist in style. (Thoraval, 2000) However, in the period after the 1970s, art and commercial films began to branch out in different directions in Hindi cinema as popular filmmakers stopped making socially relevant or realist films. (Thoraval, 2000, pp.51) This split according to Indian Filmmaker, Rinki Roy Bhattacharya took place because, “renowned directors [in the Hindi film industry] were [now] replaced by a new generation of filmmakers, most of whom had been trained at the Film Institute in Pune or were the products of the cine club movement in the country.”⁹ (Thoraval, 2000 pp.51) Thus, according to Rinki Roy Bhattacharya the division between art and popular films in India was created by a new breed of directors whose cinematic aesthetics was very different from those of the previous generation.

Even though the 1980's saw the release of some of the most successful films of renowned Indian actor, Amitabh Bachchan like, *Shaan* (1980) and *Coolie* (1983) as well as the rise of the next generation actors including Rishi Kapoor and Aamir Khan filmmaking techniques, storylines and themes still remained the same. The films of Amitabh Bachchan which gained much popularity in this era usually depicted him as a common man fighting against all the evils of Indian society. Although these films addressed issues important to the common man, the treatment of their subject matter was neither authentic in style nor realistic in portrayal. As a result these films

⁹Rinki Roy Bhattacharya, documentary filmmaker is the daughter of the famous Indian filmmaker, Bimal Roy and wife of filmmaker, Basu Bhattacharya.

were not taken very seriously by a majority of audiences who just looked upon them as masala flicks.

The 1990's brought with them youth films and movies catering to younger audiences who had been much neglected until this period. The hero of the 1990's was not the 'angry young man' like Amitabh Bachchan but someone with traditional values whose only interest was to win the affection of his lady love and with the approval of their families.¹⁰ Family oriented melodramas therefore ruled the roost in this epoch. Although these feel-good films managed to win over the box office and the masses they were not indicative of the social conditions of the times unlike older films. These films with their emphasis on fantasy sequences and consumerist lifestyles were only interested in entertaining audiences by transporting them into the world of the make believe. Aesthetic realism was therefore not an area of concern for audiences who wanted to experience the good life via the medium of film. Commercial Hindi cinema in order to meet this demand of its audiences employed lavish productions and consequently cinema was perceived to be a gross exaggeration of reality.

Questions of reality on the big screen which have not been debated about in the past in Hindi cinema are now resurfacing with the entry of young Hindi film directors like Madhur Bhandarkar,¹¹ Sudhir Mishra,¹² Vishal Bharadwaj and Rakesh Mehra all of whom are de-glamorizing Hindi cinema through their realist stories, natural cinematography and nonprofessional casts. Aesthetic realism which was once associated

¹⁰The angry young man films were popularized by Amitabh Bachchan who played this role with panache in a number of his very successful films. In these films Bachchan often took the law into his own hands to deliver justice to the poor while punishing law breakers who were most often than not evil moneylenders and corrupt officials.

¹¹Madhur Bhandarkar has made a number of mainstream films while using the realist style of filmmaking to tell stories on subjects like dancing girls, sexual abuse etc. His most famous films are, Chandini Bar (2001), Page 3 (2005) and Corporate (2006)

¹²Sudhir Mishra is another upcoming Bollywood director who has made films on a variety of themes including prostitution, Chameli (2003), naxalite uprisings, Hazaaron Khwaishein Aisi (2003) and the slums of Dharavi in Dharavi (1992).

with art cinema has now returned to Bollywood as Indian filmmakers are increasingly seeking to convince their audiences of the authenticity of their stories and story telling methods and without compromising on quality of their productions. This trend is also reflective of changing values in Indian society as young audiences who have grown up watching films from Hollywood are now unwilling to watch excessively dramatic and over the top Hindi films. This young audience is the group fueling the demand for realist films in India. This new trend is refreshing as the previous audiences of Hindi cinema favored melodrama, sentimentalism and escapism in comparison to the more mellow fare of the 2000s. However, today in 2007 not only has it become prestigious for filmmakers to make popular films on socially relevant themes but it is also considered high-status for film stars to be a part of a socially relevant project due to the social tag attached to them.

This change in audience tastes is also a result of globalization and urbanization in the Indian society. A careful analysis of changing economic and social trends during the 1990's reveals to us that the Indian society underwent a great deal of transition in this period due to economic liberalization and globalization. In many ways this leaning towards global and realist cinema can be traced to the changes that resulted from this period because it was during this decade that Indian audiences were exposed to international films and television programs from all parts of the globe. This gave the new generation of Indian filmgoers the opportunity to compare films from the West with those from India and ask for Bollywood to integrate the two styles of filmmaking. It was this demand for a new Bollywood genre that eventually led to the birth of experimental films in India.¹³

¹³Experimental films in India came about during the mid 1990s and this genre comprised of small budget, bi and multilingual films. These films employed a cast of both professional actors and amateurs in their productions. In most cases experimental filmmakers had studied filmmaking/worked in the west and were individuals who were dissatisfied with commercial cinema from Bollywood. In addition, experimental films as a genre targeted young, educated, urban (middle and upper class) English speaking Indians. One important characteristic of these films is their devotion to aesthetic

Experimental films as a genre are well known for their aesthetic realism of content and style. Experimental films due to their visual style and narrative structure have helped familiarize Indian audiences with realist film techniques common to Western cinema. Experimental filmmakers like Kaizad Gustad, Aparna Sen and Nagesh Kukunoor by making small budget films on everyday subjects and capturing them in a natural manner and without the usual musical fanfare of Bollywood have helped create a new kind of realist cinema in India. Since the mid 1990s this genre of filmmaking has gained much popularity in India. This re-emergence of the realist strand in Hindi cinema can thus be attributed to the changes in Indian society as well as in the Indian film industry.

Today in 2007, popular Hindi films are striving to cash in on the re-birth of the realist trend by making films on topics that Indian audiences can identify with. One recent film that successfully employed this trend to connect with Indian audiences was the Hindi blockbuster RDB. This film directed by Rakesh Om Prakash Mehra was widely appreciated both by the press and public for the realism in its style and narrative. This factor also went on to help RDB enjoy much commercial success and social appeal in India. In the following section, I will deconstruct the narrative and stylistic elements of RDB and showcase how Mehra relied on different specifics of realism and especially the classical Hollywood style (CHS) to convince audiences of RDB's authenticity.

Realism as this chapter has argued is an extremely relative concept and can manifest itself in numerous ways. In an interesting paper on 'Realism and Danish Cinema', Birger Langkjaer notes that there are four specific ways to make sense of realism in film and these are perceptual realism; realism of style (e.g. visual style, acting style,

realism of style, content and presentation. These films are a far departure from the masala flicks of Bombay as they preferred to avoid all the elements that were characteristic of Hindi commercial cinema.

musical style, scenography); realism of narrative and realism as recognition (realism of social, psychological, cultural and emotional factors) (Langkjaer, 2005, pp.2). This acknowledgement of the different levels of realism is a useful to begin the analysis of RDB because Mehra employs realism on all these four levels in order to emotionally bond with his young audiences.

One way to decode perceptual realism is to check if a movie is perceived as real by its audiences. In the case of RDB, both audiences and critics felt that the film was realistic at the level of narrative and style. At the very basic level, this information is valuable to know because it tells us that Mehra's narrative and style were perceived as real because it helped audiences relate to their own immediate experience with reality. At the perceptual level, the realism of a film text helps people acknowledge and compare realism in the text with the world outside the theatre. Additionally, RDB was also categorized as real because film critics in India felt that Mehra's filmmaking techniques (i.e. its style) were reflective of a new trend of realist filmmaking in Bollywood. When discussing style in the context of a film it becomes imperative to define style.

David Bordwell defines style as the "systematic use of cinematic devices". (Bordwell, 1985 pp.35) Style in cinema refers to all aspects of cinematic representation like mise-en-scene, camerawork, visual effects, editing, lighting and sound. Style in a film functions not only at the basic level of shots (pans and close ups etc) but also covers color, composition, background music and voice over narration. The basic purpose of style is to support the narrative through techniques of sound and camera in order to enhance the pleasure and realism of the viewing experience. Realism as a style not only helps in aesthetic appreciation and commercial appeal of a film but also facilitates viewers to identify with the characters on the screen. RDB, I argue, employs the CHS of filmmaking to appear realistic to audiences.

At the level of narration, realism can be evaluated for its narrative structure and content this includes an analysis of the subject matter of the film in question. Although, there is no single narrative format that can be considered more realistic than the other, the CHS is perceived as realistic by audiences due to its tight narrative structure, closed ending and goal driven protagonists. In RDB, Mehra depends on the CHS of narration to help audiences make sense of his multi-themed narrative. Additionally, the subject matter of RDB (which is inspired from real life events in India) makes it seem like Mehra narrative is imitative of real life. Last but not-the-least, realism at the level of recognition examines the social, psychological, cultural and emotional factors of a film that contribute to the overall impression of realism in a film. Even a science fiction film like Star Wars has to incorporate emotional and socio-cultural realism in its narrative structure so as to bond with its viewers. RDB's audiences construed the film as real because they could emotionally connect with the characters and the events in the film. The true to life social and cultural setting of Mehra's film made it easy for young urban audiences to recognize and relate to problems and conflicts of the protagonists in RDB.

The trope of realism thus works on various levels in RDB. Therefore in order to deconstruct realism in RDB it is useful to begin by analyzing the specifics of narrative and style as these two elements played an important role in convincing audiences of RDB's authenticity. In RDB, Mehra employs the classical Hollywood narrative and style to stimulate audiences into engaging with the realism of his re-presentations on the screen. The CHS is a distinctive cinematic approach that relies on specific narrative and stylistic techniques to lure the audiences into buying the re-presentations of reality on the big screen. The CHS is also commonly called the invisible style as its primary motive is to persuade audiences about the lack of artificiality in order to impress them about the authenticity or genuineness of a film text. The important narrative characteristics of the CHS include a clear chain of events, a consistent, goal

driven and a psychologically complex protagonist/s, a conflict that is introduced early in the plot, a tight chain of cause-and-effect,¹⁴ a heterosexual romance and a definitive ending. Additionally, a classical Hollywood film also utilizes a three act structure to narrate a story to its audiences.

In the first act the lead characters and their problems are introduced to the spectators. In the second act these problems are shown progressing to the point of high conflict and in the third act the conflicts in the plot are all completely resolved. This simplistic but highly effective three-tier narrative structure helps audiences understand films in an easier manner. The narrative elements of CHS are enhanced by stylistic techniques like continuity editing,¹⁵ adherence of the 180 degree rule,¹⁶ incorporation of the shot-reverse-shot technique¹⁷ and the use of the three-point light system.¹⁸ It is through the use of these specific narrative and stylistic techniques that filmmakers convince audiences of the realism of their film texts.

¹⁴Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson argue that the Hollywood narrative revolves around the dominant, which in other words consists of the narrative causality. Narrative causality is introduced in the CHS in order to give the characters something to react to. Bordwell, D., Staiger, J. and Thompson, K. (pp.12-23)

¹⁵Continuity editing refers to a visual style in which viewers do not notice cuts or camera movements. A scene in this style usually begins with the establishing shot (to introduce the basic setting and characters), shifts to a medium shot and finally ends with the close up of the characters.

¹⁶The 180 degree system - "The continuity approach to editing dictates that the camera should stay on one side of the action to ensure consistent left-right spatial relations between objects from shot to shot. The 180 degree line is the same as the axis of action." Bordwell, *Film Art* (pp.504)

¹⁷In the short reverse shot "two or more shorts are edited together that alternate characters, typically in a conversation situation. Over the shoulder framings are common in shot/reverse-shot editing". Bordwell, *Film Art* (pp. 505)

¹⁸In a three point lighting system "is a common arrangement using three directions of light on the screen; from behind the subjects (backlighting) from one bright source (key light) and from a less bright source balancing the key light (fill light)". Bordwell, *Film Art* (pp. 506)

4.3 RDB: A textual analysis

According to David Bordwell, the CH narrative deals with the construction of a story out of the plot. While the story refers to all the events in the narrative (both inferred and explicit) ordered chronologically, the plot deals with a series of events as represented in the film. Mehra merges two distinct plots to tell story of RDB and this aspect makes his narrative structure non- linear in nature. While the first/main plot of RDB deals with events set in the present; the five friends, their friendship, the making of the docudrama and their political transformation, the second/sub plot deals with events from India's past; the five freedom-fighters, their role in the India's struggle for independence and their eventual deaths.

While the first plot of RDB is emergent and unpredictable (because viewers do not know what to expect from it or how it will end), the second plot is closed and familiar (as viewers are aware of the historical significance and outcome of the events in this part). The unique aspect about RDB is the intersection of its two plot lines. The two plots in RDB begin to merge when one of the friends dies in an air crash. This incident enables Mehra to compare the actions of the revolutionaries (and their struggle against the British) with those of the friends (and their struggle against politicians in India) and use the same to comment on the current socio-political situation in India.

4.3.1 RDB: The first act

The opening shot of RDB takes us inside a jail in British India where a British jailor (James McKinley) informs two Indian revolutionaries (Ashfaqullah Khan, and Ram Prasad Bismil) of their imminent execution. The sepia color tones and low key lighting of this scene give evoke an old time feel in the minds of the audiences. Mehra also makes use of soft focus and warm colors (yellow and orange) in the historical plot to emotionally arouse his viewers. However, the non-diegetic rock music that

plays in the background of this scene reminds viewers that RDB is not a historical bio-pic but a youth film that incorporates history in its sub plot. RDB which begins on a serious note manages to successfully establish within the first few minutes of its plot time the courageous personalities of the two revolutionaries as well as their deep friendship. The first sequence ends with James McKinley reminiscing (via his diary) of his encounters with the fearless revolutionaries. This scene establishes James McKinley as the omniscient voice of god narrator of the happenings in the second plot. Mehra uses the diary format and voice over narration to depict key moments from the Indian freedom struggle all of which are shot from the perspective of James McKinley using the help of an auditory flashback. The voice-of- god narration also adds to the objectivity and credibility of the historical story and Mehra uses this technique to reinforce the authority of his narrative and support the docudrama like feel of the second plot. The opening credits of RDB are accompanied by a montage of photos and archival video footage from the Indian freedom struggle and this docudrama-like treatment of the credits draws attention to the fact that RDB is based on Indian history.

RDB's story begins in present day London where Sue, the granddaughter of James McKinley is desirous of making a docudrama on the revolutionaries who inspired her grandfather while he was in India. However, when her company backs out of funding the project, Sue resigns and heads to India to make the docudrama out of her own funds. Sue's strong personal motivation to make a docudrama is clearly established in the very beginning of the narrative and it is this cause that drives the rest of the narrative forward. Sue arrives in New Delhi where she meets Sonia, the Indian contact initially assigned to help her make the documentary.

The fact that Sue can converse in Hindi is established early in the narrative as it is meant to reflect Sue's dedication to the project. Sue's accented Hindi not only makes her character more believable and real but also helps her connect with Indian

audiences on a personal level. This identification is crucial as Sue is one of the central protagonists of RDB. Mehra not only films the first plot from Sue's point of view (POV) but also uses her character to give audiences an outsiders (i.e. westerner's) perspective on the socio-political problems in present day consumer India.



Figure 4.1. Sue looking at pictures of the revolutionaries during the making of her documentary

Photo courtesy-Lutgendorf, P. (2006) Review on Rang De Basanti in "In cinema", University of Iowa. Retrieved on 15th August 2007 from <http://www.uiowa.edu/incinema/Rang%20de%20Basanti.html>

Sue and Sonia begin to hold screen-tests for the docudrama which is to feature an elaborate re-enactment of the revolutionaries' decisive acts: "the Kakori train robbery of 1925; the fatal shooting of police officer J. P. Saunders in retaliation for clubbing to death, (during a nonviolent protest in 1928) elderly nationalist leader Lala Lajpat Rai; the April, 1929 detonation of a non-fatal bomb in the Delhi Central Assembly; and the subsequent imprisonment and execution of their revolutionaries."¹⁹ However,

¹⁹Photo courtesy-Lutgendorf, P. (2006) Review on Rang De Basanti in "In cinema", University of Iowa. Retrieved from <http://www.uiowa.edu/incinema/Rang%20de%20Basanti.html>

Sue's auditions only attract incompetent young amateurs who are unable to relate to or even convincingly recite nationalist slogans of the revolutionaries like, "Vande Mataram!" (Hail the Motherland) or "Inqilab Zindabad!" (Long live the revolution).

Mehra films and edits the scene of auditions on the lines of a reality show on television. The montage, composition and juxtaposition of images in this scene are shot in a format more common to television than film. Additionally, the spontaneous camera action gives the images a natural quality and this enhances the realism of the sequence. This technique not only provides comic relief to audiences but also conveys the larger message that generation-X in India is unable to relate to issues like nationalism and patriotism. An examination of the above sequence in RDB tells us that Mehra uses intertextuality of formats (in this case a mix of reality television and documentary cinematic techniques) to create the illusion of reality.



Figure 4.2. Three point lighting in the first act

RDB stills (2006) Retrieved on 15th August 2007 from www.sulekha.com



Figure 4.3. Natural lighting in the second and third acts

RDB stills (2006) Retrieved on 15th August 2007 from www.sulekha.com

After a disappointing day of auditions, Sonia takes Sue to the classroom (an amphitheatre where college students hang out and have fun) where she meets; Aslam, a conservative Muslim; Karan Singhania, the Hindu son of a businessman; Sukhwinder Singh “Sukhi” (Sharman Joshi), a fun loving Sikh and Daljit Singh, “DJ”, a Sikh who does not want to leave the gates of his college and the circle of his friends to enter the real world. The diversity of the friends in RDB is designed to reflect the unity in diversity of the youth in India. The writers of RDB have incorporated diversity among the main characters to ensure that all Indian youngsters can connect with the central protagonists and their values. Additionally, this diversity also resulted in RDB being labeled ‘cosmopolitan’ and ‘secular’ by the Indian press. Mehra employs the three-point-lighting system in his first act to introduce central characters and

enhance their appeal²⁰ but shifts to natural lighting in his second and third acts to make characters and events seem more natural and real.

Sue's first meeting with the friends is disrupted when members of a Hindu political party (youth-wing) clad in 'saffron' clothes and lead by Laxman Pandey (Atul Kulkarni) object to the partying habits of college students. The attitude of the Hindu party workers in RDB has been compared to the actions of the 'Shiv Sainiks', a radical Hindu political group, whose members not only oppose western culture but also the presence of Muslims in India.²¹ After a heated argument with the anti-west/anti-Muslim party workers, the angry youngsters cool off by visiting places of national importance in Delhi before landing up at the 'dhaba' (open air-roadside eatery) run by DJ's mother. In the above sequence, Mehra uses a night vision camera to depict the sights and sounds of Delhi. In addition, the viewer gets to see places of national and historical importance like the India gate and the parliament house in this sequence and this aspect arouses the patriotic emotions of the audiences. Furthermore, the use of the night vision camera coupled with classic rock music from the 80's and 90's in the background augments the youthful flavor of RDB. The musical score (both diegetic and non-diegetic) of RDB is composed by AR Rahman (India's most famous music director), who keeps the musical tastes of the target audience in every scene. Even the use of rock music in the background (in both the plots) is deliberate and is meant to reflect the youthful zest of the friends and the revolutionaries.

RDB is based in Delhi and Mehra's use of popular college hangouts, especially the north campus in the University of Delhi (where RDB is shot) and other places like the Red Fort, India Gate, the Parliament of India, and the Delhi- Noida highway helps him find favor with his young audiences. Additionally, from the above sequence as well as

²⁰The three point and low key lighting techniques are important characteristics of the CHS of filmmaking.

²¹As evidenced by my study of blogs and newspaper articles on RDB.

many others it can be said that Mehra locational choices are authentic (i.e. they are actual and not fictional places/locations) and have been carefully selected for being popular among young college going students in Delhi.²² The locational authenticity of RDB outdoor scenes helps Mehra communicate the ‘Indianness’ of the film and its characters to his viewers. Furthermore, RDB’s locations are also augmented by excellent set design. The sets in RDB (the graffiti wall and the amphitheatre, etc) which are contemporary and funky have been designed by advertising hotshot, Sameer Chanda whose decor has managed to give RDB a collegial look.



Figure 4.4. The colorful Delhi campus in RDB

*Photo courtesy-Lutgendorf, P. (2006) Review on Rang De Basanti in “In cinema”,
University of Iowa. Retrieved on 15th August from
<http://www.uiowa.edu/incinema/Rang%20de%20Basanti.html>*

²²Locational authenticity helped viewers connect with the protagonists and also enhanced the realism of scenes in the film. Bloggers were of the opinion that Mehra’s choice of locations helped him augment the aesthetic realism of RDB.

At the dhaba, Sue meets the final member of Sonia's inner circle, flight Lieutenant Ajay Rathore, who is also Sonia's boyfriend. During dinner at the dhaba, Sue who is impressed by the bonding between the friends requests them to act in her film. However, Sue's idea is rejected by the friends who find it hard to relate to the concept of nationalism. Even the patriotic Ajay is unable to change his friends' opinions on this subject and accepts defeat. This scene gained immense popularity among audiences for capturing the disillusionment and angst of the urban, middle class in post independent India.²³ Mehra by capturing the mood of the urban, middle class in India augments the socio-cultural realism experienced by the viewers in RDB. This aspect serves to enhance realism at the level of recognition in the above sequence.

The rehearsals for Sue's documentary began when DJ who has a soft spot for Sue convinces his friends to be a part of the project. However, as rehearsals get underway, Sue realizes that her cast is unable to relate to the characters they are portraying. Additionally, the lackadaisical attitude of her cast also infuriates Sue who takes it upon herself to inform the group about the lives of the revolutionaries and their contribution to Indian struggle for independence.²⁴ As the rehearsals progress, the friends slowly but steadily begin taking an interest in the docudrama and the characters they play.

In a side track to the main story, Mehra informs audiences about Aslam's conservative Muslim family and their discomfort with his non-Muslim friends and pro-India outlook. While Aslam's family is of the opinion that Muslims are second-rate cit-

²³The dialogues in this particular scene were widely quoted in blogs that discussed RDB.

²⁴RDB has been criticized by some sections of the press for its depiction of post-colonial India. A post colonial critique of RDB requires us to understand that the movie perpetuates the superiority of western authority and knowledge by stating that it requires a western intellectual to modernize Indians. This fact is especially made apparent in scenes where Sue's didactic speeches of the sacrifices made by the Indian freedom-fighters are shown having a positive effect on the behavior/thinking of Indian youngsters. In this movie, Mehra seems to make the claim that postcolonial nations do not have the capacity to govern themselves and their citizenry. This in fact is in direct contrast to the ideology of the revolutionary freedom-fighters depicted in the movie, who were not only anti-imperialists but also socialists and anarchists. These larger facts have been ignored in the movie.

izens in India, Aslam does not seem to endorse this belief of his family. However, Aslam's devotion to Islam is perceived as a threat to India and all Hindus by the pro-Hindu political worker, Laxman Pandey who constantly taunts Aslam by calling him a 'Pakistani'.²⁵ This depiction of Aslam as a Muslim youngster caught between his traditional parents and anti-Muslim acquaintances enables Mehra to draw attention to the tensions between Hindus and Muslims in India. In order to help the two communities integrate, Mehra cites the historical example of the revolutionary Ashfaqullah Khan, a Muslim (whose role in Sue's film is played by Aslam) and the friendship he shared with his compatriot, Ram Prasad 'Bismil', a Hindu (whose role in Sue's film is played by Laxman). Mehra thus uses RDB to draw attention to the real life camaraderie between revolutionaries of different faiths in pre-independent India. Furthermore Mehra by recalling the sacrifices made by Muslim freedom-fighters also conveys the larger message that Muslims are as patriotic as the Hindus.

After casting Laxman to play the role of Bismil, Sue begins to shoot her docudrama. The process of filming the docudrama is depicted in the non-diegetic song 'Rang De Basanti', set in Punjab and sung by the Punjabi folk singer Daler Mehndi. This musical interlude shot in the format of a music video and incorporates shots of the friends rehearsing their dialogues for the docudrama along with fragmented images of them dancing and having fun in Punjab. This song is stylistically edited on the lines of a music video using 'thematic' editing which is an editing style that incorporates multiple cuts and close up shots to convey the emotions and the feelings of the youngsters during their rehearsals.²⁶ This intertextual technique is reflective

²⁵The word Pakistani or Paki has a very negative connotation in India due to India's experiences with Pakistani/Muslim terrorists.

²⁶Thematic editing refers to a rapid sequence of discontinuous images and shots that emphasize feelings, experiences or emotions. This type of editing is most common in music videos and advertisements.

of Mehra's desire to get his audiences to connect with the emotions of his central characters.



Figure 4.5. Thematic editing in the song Rang De Basanti

RDB stills (2006) Retrieved on 15th August 2007 from www.sulekha.com



Figure 4.6. Mehra's abundant use of close ups

*Photo courtesy-Lutgendorf, P. (2006) Review on Rang De Basanti in "In cinema",
University of Iowa. Retrieved on 15th August from
<http://www.uiowa.edu/incinema/Rang%20de%20Basanti.html>*

A special mention also needs to be made of Mehra's shot selections in RDB most of which are highlighted in the above musical sequence. Mehra incorporates a lot of medium and close up shots in RDB so as to get his audience to emotionally identify with the characters of the film. Audiences are able to connect with the protagonists because they see and feel at close range the emotions of the protagonists and can empathize with their point of view. This not only helps them bond with the characters in the film but also enables them to engage with the events in the story. This style of filmmaking helps build realism at the level of emotional recognition.

The tale of the revolutionaries intersects the story at the end of the musical interlude and the historical flashback begins with the sequence of the Kakori train robbery of 1925,²⁷ where audiences see Azad, Bismil and Asfaq looting money from the British officers traveling in the train to Kakori. This sequence incorporates the Jallianwala Bagh massacre to inform audiences about why young revolutionaries like Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru joined the freedom struggle.²⁸ The Jallianwala Bagh sequence in RDB is shot by Mehra in black and white (while the rest of the historical flashback appears in sepia) and is accompanied by a haunting background score. This powerfully filmed scene revives painful memories of India's struggle for independence.²⁹ The Jallianwala Bagh massacre is an important historical incident because it led to the emergence of the revolutionary quit-India movement. As the shooting for Sue's docudrama progresses, the cynical youngsters begin to re-evaluate their values especially on concepts like nationalism and sacrifice. The friends who

²⁷The idea of the Kakori train robbery was conceived by Ram Prasad Bismil and Ashfaqullah Khan to carry out revolutionary activities against the British Empire in India. The duo belonged to the HRS (Hindustan Republican Association) whose objective to conduct an armed revolution against the British needed money for which Bismil looted the train at Kakori.

²⁸The Jallianwala Bagh Massacre took place in Amritsar, India on the 13th of April 1919, when British soldiers under the orders of Brigadier Reginald Dyer fired on unarmed men, women and children. According to unofficial sources, the number of casualties reported was over 1000, with more than 2000 wounded.

²⁹As evidenced by my study of blogs and newspaper articles on RDB.

were once unable to relate to the ideology of the revolutionaries now find themselves questioning their own contribution to public life. At this point in the story, Mehra returns his audiences to the past where audiences witness the capture of Ashfaq and Bismil for their involvement in the Kakori train robbery. Even as a flashback informs the audiences of the heroism of Ashfaq and Bismil the two freedom fighters are hanged to death by the British.

In sum, the first act of RDB (which lasts for about forty five minutes, until the intermission) not only establishes all the characters (both real and historical) and their relationships with each other (i.e. character development and psychology) but also sees the narrative adopt a cause and effect format (it is the cause of making the docudrama that takes RDB from the first act to the second). In addition to the above, the first act of RDB also launches a sub-plot of heterosexual romances (an important characteristic of the classical Hollywood narrative) between Sue and DJ and Sonia and Ajay. By incorporating the above elements into RDB's narrative, Mehra ensures that his film satisfies the essentials of a classical Hollywood narrative. Furthermore, it is also necessary to mention that though the narrative pace of RDB is relaxed/slow in the first act, it picks up pace in its second and third acts due to its editing and plot developments.

4.3.2 RDB: the second act

The second act begins with the execution of Bismil and Ashfaq. After this disturbing flashback, Mehra (with the help of some excellent editing) returns to the present in which audiences are taken to the farewell party of Ajay where DJ, Aslam and Karan get into a dispute with Ajay over the futility of sacrificing one's life for the country. While Ajay argues that one's nation is worth dying for, the others in the group disagree with Ajay because they find India's corruption and bureaucracy unworthy of their patriotic allegiance. Ajay who is disturbed by the perspective of

his friends tries to reason with them by telling them that, “while it is easy to criticize the political system it is not so easy to take the responsibility to change practices in society”.³⁰ Ajay advises his friends to stop critiquing the government and join politics or the army to make a difference in society or prove their allegiance to the nation. The dialogues in this sequence of RDB were widely quoted by audiences and the media alike because they had a huge impact on the actions of youngsters in India.³¹ The dialogues in RDB connected with young audiences on a personal basis because they were conversational (especially the slang, use of Punjabi words and college humor) and addressed issues of relevance to youngsters without being didactic. Audiences therefore found the dialogues and conversations in RDB natural and realistic.³² These dialogues penned by Prasoon Joshi not only successfully captures the mind set of generation-X in India but is also reflective of the way Indian youth behave in college.³³

The events of the second plot intersect the story at this juncture where audiences witness the death of the elderly freedom fighter Lala Lajpat Rai (the mentor of revolutionaries like Bhagat Singh and Azad) at the hands of the British. The news of Lalaji’s death eggs Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Azad into detonating a non-fatal bomb in the central assembly of Delhi. After this incident the Singh and Sukhdev surrender to the police and wait to be executed. Sound as a stylistic technique plays a big role in enhancing the style of RDB and this fact is highlighted in the above mentioned sequence. In this scene Mehra uses the Hindi poetry of Bhagat Singh (as a non-diegetic element in the background) when the revolutionaries are

³⁰Direct quote from RDB.

³¹As evidenced by my study of blogs and newspaper articles on RDB.

³²News Desk (2006) *Rang De Basanti readers respond*. Retrieved on April 15th 2007, from <http://in.rediff.com/movies/2006/jan/31readers.htm>

³³As evidenced by my study of blogs and newspaper articles on RDB.

violently attacked by the British for protesting against Sir John Simon. This stylistic technique not only arouses the patriotic emotions of his audiences but also helps them emotionally bond with the characters and this works well for RDB as it serves to the build realism at the level of emotion. The following sequence takes the audience into the non-diegetic song ‘Khalbali’ where Mehra juxtaposes images of the youngsters having fun with shots of the revolutionaries suffering and protesting in prison. Cross cutting (an editing technique which is a part of the CHS) is used by Mehra in this sequence to compare and contrast scenes of the friends enjoying their freedom with those of the revolutionaries suffering inside the prison.



Figure 4.7. The lush and colorful cinematography of the first plot

RDB stills (2006) Retrieved on 15th August 2007 from www.apunkachoice.com

Additionally, the lush and colorful mise-en-scene of the first plot contrasts well with the stark, gloomy and cramped mise-en-scene of the second plot which is en-

hanced by the historic locations, sepia tones, low color saturation as well as low key lighting³⁴ (using the twin techniques of darkness and shadow). Although Mehra's filmmaking techniques are stylized, keeping in mind RDB's commercial motive, his depiction of events in the second plot still creates a facade of reality. This realism is attributable not only to the historical reality of the plotline (i.e. content) but is also a result of Mehra's ability to re-tell history in a convincing manner (i.e. style).



Figure 4.8. Sepia tones and low key lighting in the second plot

*Photo courtesy-Lutgendorf, P. (2006) Review on Rang De Basanti in "In cinema",
University of Iowa. Retrieved on 15th August from
<http://www.uiowa.edu/incinema/Rang%20de%20Basanti.html>*

The point of high conflict in RDB comes when audiences are informed of the death of Ajay's death (in a MiG plane crash) via a news bulletin on New Delhi Television Limited (NDTV). Ajay's death turns controversial when India's defence minister (who is accused of buying faulty spare parts for MiG planes) deems Ajay a novice in the national media. The political corruption and blame game that takes place in India

³⁴Low key lighting creates a strong contrast between the light and dark areas by decreasing the fill light in order to increase the shadows.

after Ajay's death infuriate and sadden Ajay's friends who then retaliate by holding a candlelight vigil at India gate. However, when the police at the behest of the corrupt politicians violently break up the vigil of the youngsters and injure them, the friends realize that they need to draw public attention to the heroism of Ajay and the corruption of the bureaucrats involved in the MiG deal. Not only is the above sequence (Ajay's death to the candlelight protest) filmed in an aesthetically real manner but it has also been inspired from a real life incident in India. The heightened realism in the above sequence is a result of all of the following; Ajay's death in RDB is reported on NDTV, which is India's most popular news channel; the news report of Ajay's death on NDTV is shot in the format used by NDTV in real life. Additionally, the news story in RDB that depicts Ajay's funeral as well as the subsequent debate that ensues (in the film) on NDTV's real life program 'we the people' stars one of India's most well known television journalists.



Figure 4.9. Intertextuality of formats in RDB as seen in the use of the video camera in the musical sequence of 'Tu Bin Bataye'

Photo courtesy-Lutgendorf, P. (2006) Review on Rang De Basanti in "In cinema",

University of Iowa. Retrieved on 15th August from

<http://www.uiowa.edu/incinema/Rang%20de%20Basanti.html>

As it is clear from the deconstruction of the above sequence, Mehra style is very pastiche and he relies on variety of stylistic techniques traditionally associated with realist genres in filmmaking (news format, video tape footage and digital camera filmmaking) to convince audiences of the realism of his content. This inter-textuality of genres heightens the aesthetic realism of RDB. The realism experienced by the viewer in this sequence functions not only at the level of style and narrative but also at the level of perception as audiences were aware that this event was inspired from real life. It was a combination of all these factors that helped audiences emotionally connect with RDB and draw political attention to the Abhijit Gadgil case.

Ajay's death and the subsequent lathi charge by the police are the turning points in RDB and Mehra uses these incidents to comment on political corruption and the recent police atrocities on student protests in India.³⁵ To highlight the same, Mehra yet again re-creates the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in which audiences observe the defence minister ordering the massacre on helpless people, one of whom is Ajay. The second Jallianwala Bagh sequence is also shot in black and white tones except for splashes of red to depict the spilling of human blood. Mehra uses the intellectual montage style of editing to draw parallels between the ruthless British soldiers of the past and the corrupt Indian politicians of the present.³⁶ In the above sequence, Mehra compares the awakening of the youngsters to those of the revolutionaries while suggesting that just as the Jallianwala Bagh massacre turned common citizens into fearless revolutionaries (in the past), the ruthless lathi charge of the police forced the youngsters to transform in the present. Mehra, who employs the stylistic techniques associated with realist cinema (like documentary footage and video camera recording)

³⁵India has in recent times witnessed numerous instances of police atrocities on student led protests.

³⁶Intellectual montage refers to the "juxtaposition of a series of images to create an abstract idea not present in any one image." Bordwell, *Film Art* (pp. 505)

to film much of his second act, stylistically blurs the line between fictional and factual modes of expression in his film.

Additionally, Indian audiences were able to relate and recognize the socio-cultural realism in RDB (in the above sequence) because Mehra managed to successfully capture the public's sentiment on the issue of corruption in India. Mehra, by portraying corrupt bureaucrats/politicians as the villains of his tale struck a chord with audiences who had experienced firsthand the problems caused by corrupt state and lethargic bureaucracy. RDB's portrayal of social apathy and political corruption was well received by audiences in India because it actually corresponded to the reality-status of things as experienced by them in their daily lives.

4.3.3 RDB: The final act

In its third act, RDB's CH narrative resolves all of its conflicts and comes to a definite end. In the final act, the frustrated youngsters surreptitiously shoot the defence minister in order to avenge Ajay. Mehra uses cross cutting and parallel action in this sequence to compare the killing of the British officer Saunders (by the revolutionaries) to the murder of the defence minister (by the youngsters). In this entire sequence Mehra cuts back and forth between the past and the present (with the help of match on action cuts) to merge his two plots. It comes as no surprise that Mehra uses continuity editing in RDB to make his story appear seamless and realistic. Mehra's consistent use of continuity techniques like shot-reverse-shot, eye line matches, match on action and adherence to the 180 degree rule makes it easy for his audiences to follow RDB's story. Mehra rarely breaks from the continuity editing common to the CHS. The few times he does so are during the song picturizations where he employs thematic editing to emotionally connect with the audiences through music and dance.

When the death of the defence minister turns him into a political martyr, the youngsters realize that the only way they can expose the wrong doings of the minister is by informing the public of his corruption. To do the same, they take over the premises of 'all India' radio station at Delhi and go live on air and inform the public of their role in the death of the defence minister and the reason for the same. Mehra intersplices shots of Karan's confession on the radio with shots of ordinary citizens relating to the story of the youngsters. Before going off the radio, Karan asks his listeners to change the political and judicial system in India and to take an active interest in public life. He tells them that while it is easy to sit on the fence and criticize those in power, it is not so easy to change the status-quo of things in a democracy. Karan ends his talk on the radio by calling on young people to become the change they want to see in India. While Karan is preparing to go off-air and join the others before surrendering to the police, the friends are attacked by the commandoes from the Indian army. In the shoot out that follows the attack, all the youngsters are killed by the police. In his action-filled climax, Mehra draws clear parallels between the death of the revolutionaries at the hands of the British and the death of the students at the hands of the commandoes. This comparison is highlighted in when Mehra compares the death of DJ, Aslam and Pandey to the death of Asfaq and Bismil. A special mention needs to be made of the acting style in RDB which although emotional is still restrained and low-key therefore imparting a sense of authenticity and realism to a Bollywood movie.

The heightened realism of the final scene in RDB which shows college students all over India protesting against the brutal killing of the youngsters sees Mehra end RDB on the lines of a documentary (highlighted in the scene which depicts interviews from real life college students in India). Mehra films this sequence in the format of a 'breaking-news' byte on the TV and it's hard not to believe in the authenticity of Mehra's filmmaking which shows students throughout India (half a dozen tele-

vision edit screens) commending the actions of the protagonists. Although Mehra was severely criticized by the media and some sections of the public for depicting youngsters endorsing violence, the analysis of blogs and newspaper articles on RDB revealed that young audiences did not perceive the movie as advocating radicalism or violence but instead felt that it questioned the passivity and selfishness of young citizens while making a case for political activism and participation in public life. Thus, Mehra's viewers were in agreement with the idea that "young Indians have to become the change they desire to see in the country".³⁷

Although RDB helped spur youngsters to take an active part in public life, the final act of the movie (the shooting of the defence minister, the siege of the radio station and the confrontation with the police) destroyed the realist narrative created by Mehra in his previous acts. But even this unreal climax only had a positive effect on audiences because it distanced them from identifying with the characters in the final act of the movie.³⁸ Additionally, the alienation effect brought about by RDB's climax also helped audiences to objectively (i.e. without falling prey to emotions) evaluate, reflect and debate on the acts of the central characters in real and virtual life. This reflexive nature of the audience response towards RDB also played a part in the movie being called as a 'social' film.

³⁷Direct quote from RDB

³⁸The study of my blogs and newspaper articles on RDB reveals that the majority of its audiences were unable to relate to the events in the final act because they felt that the action of the youngsters "stretches the boundaries of logic". Additionally, my study of audience response to the film discloses that young audiences were found the climax of RDB "simplistic, formulaic, exaggerated and extreme". Moreover, though, the majority of Indian audiences felt that Mehra was not endorsing violence as the solution to problems in present day India, they were of the opinion that RDB had succumbed to the dictates of commercial cinema at least as far as its ending was concerned. Mehra's surreal ending not only helped his audiences emotionally distance themselves from the actions of the characters on the screen but also helped foster a huge debate in the media about the dangers of endorsing violence in films. The cast and the crew of RDB also issued statements to the press and appeared on various media programs in order to clarify their position on the surreal ending of RDB and the rights and wrongs of doing the same. The quotes in this footnote have been taken from: Choudhury, C. (2006, January 31) *Against Rang De Basanti*. Blog entry. Retrieved on April, 20th 2007, from <http://middlestage.blogspot.com/2006/01/against-rang-de-basanti.html>

To conclude, the detailed examination of the stylistic and narrative features of RDB makes it apparent that Mehra employed mimetic realist strategies common to the CHS to convince audiences of the realism of his story and the importance of his message. As stronger reality appraisals tend to result in strong emotional responses from audiences, Mehra's trope of realism enabled his audiences to emotionally engage with the film and its central characters. In addition, the social label acquired by RDB, which was not only bolstered by popular reviewing from the press but also by the promotional activities surrounding the film helped Mehra to bond with the audiences in India. All of these individual aspects not only went on to influence youngsters to rationally discuss and critically debate about the film and other political and social aspects related to it but also helped set the ground for future acts of citizenship in India. The end result of all these above factors was an expansion of the public sphere and the revitalization of the democratic spirit in India.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Through this thesis I have showcased the manner in which RDB a commodified cinematic product helped revitalize citizenship among the youth and brought about an expansion of the public sphere in India. To briefly sum up, the incorporation of the various levels of realism in RDB facilitated Indian audiences to emotionally bond with the central characters and the majority of the events the movie. This connection in turn helped Mehra connect with his audiences enabling them to relate to RDB and its theme. Thus, audiences who were able to identify with the protagonists now felt encouraged to imbibe Mehra's larger message of "become the change you wish to see in your country".¹ It was this desire to improve the system that motivated like minded youngsters to critically argue and discuss RDB and its message on the Internet and in real life thereby setting the ground for political citizenship and engagement which in a few months translated into citizenship in the real world when the injustice in the Jessica Lall and other similar cases was brought into public limelight.

The political and social engagement which took place in real life and on the Internet after RDB's release not only provided Indian youngsters the opportunity to publicly declare their status as active citizens but also enabled them to showcase their individual efforts to participate in India's public space. This social and political engagement had a positive effect on the political system as it resulted in policy changes in India which included an urgent appeal for judicial reform. Thus, the active citizenship witnessed after RDB's release both in real life and on the Internet

¹Direct quote from RDB

not only helped expand the public sphere but also revitalized democracy in India. This project, by relying on the unique example of RDB, establishes the link between consumption and citizenship and argues that commercial entertainment can also promote rational debate and contribute to the expansion of the public sphere in certain circumstances.

5.1 Suggestions for future research

At the end of this thesis project, I find it necessary to discuss areas for future research. As this research focuses specifically on the release of RDB in India during January 2006 and examines audience response towards it in the period following its release any potential future study in this area can benefit from the employment of long term audience research (using direct observation and audience surveys). A long term audience study will make it possible for researchers to examine the effects of popular social cinema on the social and political acts of Indian audiences. Additionally, since popular social cinema is gaining much popularity in India a longitudinal analysis of changing audience tastes and response can prove invaluable to understand the relationship between entertainment and politics.

5.2 Implications for future research

Last but not-the-least, before I conclude, I would ask readers to dwell on the nature of audience response towards RDB and other recent popular films (on social and political issues) from Bollywood like *Yuva* (2004) and *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* (2006) and *Chak De India* (2007). Although no Bollywood film has enjoyed the kind of audience response RDB has, a few recent films have still had a positive effect on the actions of Indian audiences especially in respect to influencing audience behavior in certain ways. For e.g. the recent Hindi film *Chak De India* which released in India on August 10th 2007 and stars Bollywood superstar Shah Rukh Khan, tells the true

life story of ex-Indian Hockey captain(played by Khan) who is accused of throwing away the world cup final to India's arch rival Pakistan. Khan comes back many years later to coach a bunch of unknown girls to a world cup victory. This movie had the effect of popularizing Hockey (India's national sport) in a country where the game of cricket dominates over all other sports. Additionally, this film also used many of the strategies popularized by the makers of RDB; the movie is based on a true life story; uses realist techniques of narrative and style; stars a bunch of unknown youngsters; is marketed like a youth film and is based on a nationalist and patriotic theme.

Additionally, looking at the positive response of Indian audiences towards recent popular-social films, I suspect that social and political participation brought about by specific media texts will continue to increase. Although, it is not possible for any researcher to accurately gauge future political and social commitment from audiences by examining a single media text, I would still like readers to consider the above possibility because popular-social films are increasingly being accepted by Indian audiences. Moreover, even if this genre can inspire people in the short period that it is in vogue, it will still make a huge difference to society to know why and how it did the same.

APPENDIX A

LIST OF AWARDS WON BY RDB

BAFTA Awards (British academy of film and television arts) (2006)

- Best Film Not In The English Language

Filmfare Awards (2007)

- Best Director - Rakeysh Om Prakash Mehra
- Best Music Director - A.R. Rahman
- Critics Best Performance - Male - Aamir Khan
- Best Editing - P.S. Bharati
- Best Cinematography - Binod Pradhan
- RD Burman Award for New Music Talent - Naresh Iyer
- Best Actor - Aamir Khan
- Best Supporting Actor - Siddharth
- Best Supporting Actor - Kunal Kapoor
- Best Supporting Actress - Soha Ali Khan

Star Screen Awards (2007)

- Best Director - Rakeysh Om Prakash Mehra
- Best Supporting Actress - Kirron Kher
- Most Promising Newcomer - Male - Siddharth
- Best Background Music - A.R. Rahman
- Star Screen Award Best Screenplay - Rensil D'Silva and Rakeysh Om Prakash Mehra
- Star Screen Award Best Editing - P.S. Bharati
- Star Screen Award Best Special Effects

Stardust Awards (2007)

- Breakthrough Performance Award (Male) - Kunal Kapoor

Global Indian Film Awards (2007)

- GIFA Best Director - Rakesh Om Prakash Mehra
- GIFA Best Supporting Actress - Soha Ali Khan
- GIFA Best Music Director - A. R. Rahman
- GIFA Best Background Music - A. R. Rahman
- GIFA Best Screenplay - Rensil D'Silva and Rakesh Om Prakash Mehra
- GIFA Best Editing - P. S. Bharti
- GIFA Best Art Director - Sameer Chanda

Zee Cine Awards (2007)

- Best Director - Rakesh Om Prakash Mehra
- Best Music Director - A. R. Rahman
- Best Cinematography - Binod Pradhan
- Best Editing - P. S. Bharti
- Best Lyrics - Prasoon Joshi

IIFA Awards (the awards of the International Indian Film Academy) (2007)

- Best Film Editing - PS Bharati
- Best Cinematographer - Binod Pradhan
- Best Film - Rakesh Om Prakash Mehra and Ronnie Screwalla
- Best Supporting Actress - Kirron Kher
- Best Supporting Actor - Sharman Joshi
- Best Director - Rakesh Om Prakash Mehra
- Best Actor - Aamir Khan

APPENDIX B

EVALUATION SHEET

- Blog Information
 1. Case number
 2. Search term used to generate the blog
 3. Blog URL
 4. Blog site
 5. Parent site
 6. Name of blogger
 7. Age of blogger
 8. Blogger location
 9. Blogger profession
 10. Theme of the blog
- Blog Post
 1. Date of post
 2. Number of words
 3. Title of post
 4. Focus of post
 5. Sources of information for the post
- Evaluation of the Blog Post
 1. Is the post a review of RDB (yes/no)?
 2. Does the post critique RDB (yes/no)?
 3. What aspect of RDB does the post/blogger appreciate?
 4. Does the post/blogger discuss the brand partnerships of RDB?
 5. Do responses/comments on the blog discuss RDB's commercial dealings?
 6. Is there a mention of RDB's marketing/promotional strategies?
 7. Does the post mention the trope of realism in RDB (yes/no)?

8. If yes, what aspect of realism does the blogger or reader agree with?
9. If no, what aspect of realism does the blogger or reader not agree with?
10. Citation of real incidents to engage with RDB
11. Citation of real people/places to engage with RDB or its message
12. Is the blog or post being used to plan/discuss acts of citizenship in real life?
13. If yes, what are they discussing and how?
14. Does the blogger make any suggestions to improve the system (yes/no)?
15. If yes, what are the suggestions?
16. What is the over all message of the post?
17. Does the blogger quote RDB in the blog or post (yes/no)?
18. If yes- how have the quotes been appropriated to communicate the bloggers sentiments?
19. Does the blogger or reader reflect on the politics of RDB?
20. Does the blogger agree or disagree with the politics of RDB?
21. If yes, why?
22. If no, why?
23. Responses/comments of readers to the post

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